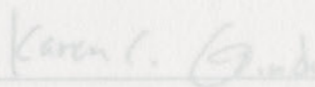


Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Liberal Studies.


Thesis Committee

Nov 1998 THE OBSERVER



Janet K. Weirick

Karen Gindele, Ph.D.

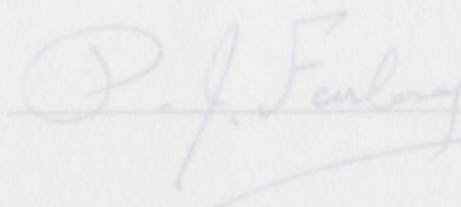


Sandra Winicur, Ph.D.

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree

Master of Liberal Studies
in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Indiana University

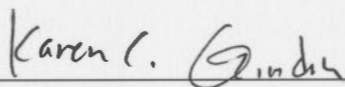
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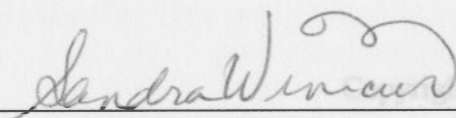
Patrick Furlong, Ph.D.

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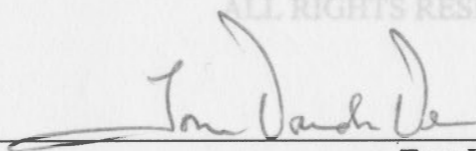
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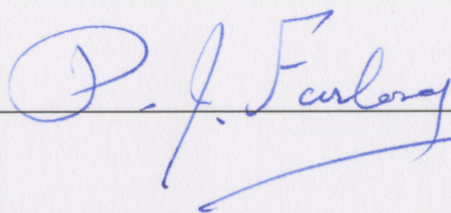
Karen Gindele, Ph.D.



Sandra Winicur, Ph.D.



Tom Vander Ven, Ph.D.



Patrick Furlong, Ph.D.

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Who Janet K. Weirick

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When I began writing my first book, I was a graduate student in the English department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. My research and my dissertation were about the history of the American West. I spent a year of my undergraduate work in a rather boring major at that university. The other students in the English department were all very bright and very talented. I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people, without whom I could not have completed this project:

Dr. Furlong, who gave me permission to fill so many pages.
 Karen Gindele, who listened to my struggles and delighted in my characters.
 Sandra Winick, who warned me about my Midwestern voice.
 Tom Vander Ven, who reminded me to read the work aloud and listen to its words.
 Meredith, who knew the perfect title.
 Norman, who was with me when I was absent.
 Robin, who made me feel like an artist.
 Jacquie, Gale, Bob, and Who Showed me the Tribes. I know what it felt like to read the book for pleasure.

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1992	Robert and the Englishman
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Meredith, who knew the perfect title.

Norman, who was patient with my absence.

Robin, who made me feel like an artist.

Jacquie, Gale, Kathy, Bob, Deb, Michael and Don, who let me know what it felt like to read the book for pleasure.

The novel expresses the dynamics of group behavior and its affect upon the life of an individual. The main character, Katherine, encounters situations and events which undermine her previous perceptions of truth and reality. Her personal values are challenged and explored. Her assumptions are tested and she experiences helplessness in the face of adversity, while she meets people who amaze and baffle her. The reader observes these activities and becomes involved in Katherine's reactions to them.

PREFACE

The larger questions addressed in the story are basically sociological issues. Why is it so When I began work on my Master of Liberal Studies degree program, I focused mainly on the humanities and social science categories. My education and life experiences had helped me develop particular interests in these fields. I spent a year of my undergraduate work as a creative writing major at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. The workshop environment of this program gave me tools to critically review works of fiction. Later, I graduated from Manchester College with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology. The combination of these two majors was a perfect background for the MLS curriculum. I looked forward to attending graduate-level seminars that incorporated theories and language with which I was familiar.

I have also held various positions in non-profit public agencies. I have been a social worker, an adoption specialist and an ombudsman for nursing home residents. I have been the executive director of public housing for the elderly. I have been director of a United Way agency, serving the needs of senior citizens. I have been director of a local office of Big Brothers/Big Sisters and director of a publicly funded child care center. Over the years, these various positions brought me in contact with a deep pool of interesting situations and people.

During the time I spent as an MLS student, I experienced an environment where artistic, philosophical, sociological and historical issues were discussed in seminar settings. Eventually, I realized that these discussions helped develop ideas and perspectives that could be used to create both plot and characters for a novel. Specifically, those classes which contributed to this process were:

D501	Mozart and the Enlightenment
D503	Science and Literature
S410	Politics of Identity (Sociology Senior Seminar)
L647	British and American Authors (English Senior Seminar)
D501	Midwestern Culture
D502	Fall of the Soviet Empire
D503	Einstein's Revolution: Its impact on physics, philosophy and society

The novel expresses the dynamics of group behavior and its affect upon the life of an individual. The main character, Katherine, encounters situations and events which undermine her previous perceptions of truth and reality. Her personal values are challenged and explored. Her assumptions are tested and she experiences helplessness in the face of adversity, while she meets interesting people who amaze and baffle her. The reader observes these activities and becomes involved in Katherine's reactions to them.

The larger questions addressed in the story are basically sociological issues. Why is it so important to be part of a defined group? How does this definition affect a person's individual responses to a variety of situations? How is "normal" expressed in everyday life? If most people fall into a defined bell curve of responses in most situations, what becomes of those people on the edges of the curve? Are they important? Are they crazy? Does it matter? In a relatively closed living environment, do people tend to become "tribal"? How is that defined in the novel? From a feminist perspective, questions of personal identity within a group of traditional women are explored. Ageism and social status also appear as themes which develop the story. Power, heredity and bureaucracy are present as important elements in the lives of characters and group dynamics.

These sociological questions are presented within a humanities frame. The novel is an historic and familiar tool for exploring such issues. I have therefore utilized two major fields of emphasis as defined in the Master of Liberal Studies program at Indiana University South Bend.

certain that Helen would freeze in her tracks someday and die of exposure. They thought a woman with her family background should have someone to look after her and protect her from harm.

In response to these comments, Helen's niece had petitioned the county court to have Helen declared incompetent. If the court agreed to pronounce Helen unfit to handle her own affairs, then Ann Carter would become her legal guardian. After that,

Katherine Mitchell sat in her warm comfortable car and watched the old woman walk slowly and carefully into the apartment building. The woman was using her antique wooden cane as an extension of her slender arm. Her eyes scouted every inch of the snow-rimmed sidewalk ahead as she planned her next step. Katherine had been told that Helen Grant walked downtown twice each day at this slow and studied pace. Every few steps as she paused to rest, Helen would watch people and cars speeding past her. Then shaking her head and talking to no one in particular, she would move on. These predictable trips to the Black Forest Cafe took her two hours each morning and two hours each afternoon. Katherine had also been told that Helen was ninety-three years old and lived alone on a small fixed income. So far, this was about all Katherine knew of the woman she was assigned to observe for the next three months.

Some people in Winterborne worried about Helen's health and safety during these routine excursions into the bleak harshness of Wisconsin winter weather. Various groups and individuals would watch Helen on her daily treks and ponder over the possibility of her sudden death or injury. Ice formations on cement sidewalks and carelessly shoveled intersections presented constant threats to everyone's footing when he or she ventured out on the cold slick streets, so how could this old woman risk her life like this every day? Winter temperatures often fell below zero this far north and Helen's only coat seemed inadequate to many veterans of Midwestern cold spells. The coat was a sturdy navy wool pea jacket, purchased years ago and still serviceable. However, sometimes the wind seemed to blow through even the finest down quilted nylon jackets and people were

certain that Helen would freeze in her tracks someday and die of exposure. They thought a woman with her family background should have someone to look after her and protect her from harm.

In response to these community concerns, Helen's niece had petitioned the county court to have Helen declared incompetent. If the court agreed to pronounce Helen unfit to handle her own affairs, then Ann Carter would become her legal guardian. After that, Ann would make every decision in Helen's life, including where she lived and which toothpaste she used. Because the courts consider granting guardianship a very serious act, an independent study would be conducted to get details of Helen's ability to function. As part of this process, a local judge had been given a list of trained volunteer court advocates from which to choose a person to investigate Helen's life and report back to him. Katherine Mitchell's input would be just one portion of the court procedures, since testimony from a range of people would help form the final decision. Katherine was assigned to get to know Helen personally and conduct informal interviews with her. She would also be expected to talk to neighbors, family members and professionals who had come in contact with Helen. When all these interviews and observations were completed, Katherine would present her report and make her recommendations. The judge had given her ninety days to complete her assignment.

This first day, Katherine had watched Helen walk home. Helen hadn't bothered anyone or shouted at passing cars or fallen down. She had muttered to herself and occasionally looked up at the sky. She had stopped to watch some rusty brown squirrels play on a snow-covered lawn and she loudly called out instructions about where they should run next. Katherine smiled as Helen motioned to them with the tip of her cane and made the small creatures scatter in fear. After Helen laughed long and hard at this gleeful display of exuberance, she became serious again as she deliberately studied the uneven surface of the crosswalk before her.

Katherine had started a notebook of her observations to use when she wrote her report. She dutifully mentioned the squirrels and the slow pace of the trip and the muttering. She also noted Helen's scuffed leather oxford shoes, which clung to the crooked angles of her old feet. The sturdy cane she leaned against was made of a dark rich wood, worn and dulled where Helen's hands had grasped it for many years. Katherine admired the lined leather gloves which hid those hands from the cold and she noted the long plaid pleated skirt hanging out from under the hip-length heavy coat. Katherine sighed when she noticed that Helen's nylon support hose were the only protection her legs had against the frigid air. The last item Katherine described in her notes was a black wool beret, perched at an angle on Helen's short straight hair. Those wild grey strands stood up and around the hat like crabgrass eager to conquer a lawn.

Katherine simply wrote what she saw, as she had learned to do years ago in journalism class. She would make her judgments later, after she had actually spoken to Helen, although she had to admit that it did seem a little crazy for a 93-year old woman to walk to town twice a day, especially in winter. And that hair - did she ever look in a mirror? But Katherine did not write these reactions in her notes. She was going to play by the rules and keep an open mind. Katherine had always found comfort in trusting herself to follow the rules and people counted on her. She was nervous only because this was her first court assignment.

Helen disappeared into the lobby of the Smiling Seniors Apartment Complex as Katherine eased her Cashmere Metallic Lexus out of the parking lot and tucked her notebook into her new leather briefcase. Katherine enjoyed her professional look and the idea that she was on official business of the court. That morning, Judge Matthews had been specific with his instructions as Katherine looked at him across the huge bench. She had studied the judge's face as he spoke and she listened dutifully to his words. She concentrated on his description of the potential impact of her findings as she promised to take the work very seriously. She had known Judge Matthews socially for several years,

but she realized as she stood before him that his official language and the formality of the proceedings made him seem like a stranger.

After leaving the courthouse, Katherine had driven to the Alpine Shopping Center north of town. She had felt a sudden overwhelming need to look as powerful as she felt. She purchased a soft burgundy leather briefcase with matching notepad and for good measure, she added a Montblanc pen and pencil set. She found a Sony miniature tape recorder, a Canon compact digital camera and a Wilson day planner. Katherine was certain that she now looked well equipped to fulfill the wishes of the court. After shopping and grabbing a short lunch at home, she drove to the Smiling Seniors Apartment Building to follow Helen Grant for the remainder of the afternoon.

Now as she completed her first day as a court advocate, Katherine was invigorated and excited about starting this new project. She checked the rearview mirror and slowly maneuvered her Lexus onto the narrow street in front of the Smiling Seniors. As she pulled away and prepared for the evening ahead, she left her role as investigator and her mind returned to her responsibilities as wife and mother. She reviewed her dinner menu, wondering if she needed to stop at the supermarket before going home. She realized she needed lettuce - lots of good crisp Romaine. She was glad Molly and Phil were coming tonight because she wanted to have someone, besides Stephen, to talk to about her interesting day. Over dinner, the four of them usually talked about their children and their friends and upcoming events in Winterborne. But tonight she could bring a new idea to the table and she wondered what their reactions would be.

Helen Grant paused in the lobby of the Smiling Seniors Apartments. Her afternoon walk had contained an unusual addition. A blonde woman driving a beige car seemed to be everywhere she went. Helen had watched the car through the window of the Black Forest Cafe. After finishing her apple pie and tea, Helen began her slow

journey home and saw the same car parked a block ahead of her. Warm exhaust formed a fragile cloud behind the back window of the now familiar vehicle and the woman sat quietly reading a newspaper as Helen passed. A few minutes later, the car moved again and Helen saw it waiting in the parking lot of the Smiling Seniors. The blonde just sat inside with the engine running. Helen had never seen the woman or the car before and she didn't recognize her as a relative or friend of any of her neighbors. The car had local plates and it looked expensive. How interesting. Helen enjoyed imagining all sorts of mysterious things about this silky blonde stalker and she laughed aloud at the notion of the woman she saw having malicious intent.

Just as Helen entered the building, Liz Hurley was returning home to the apartment house. She walked up to the front entrance and stopped in her tracks as Helen laughed and muttered to herself. Liz almost turned to find another way to get inside, but instead she took a deep breath and continued forward. She hurried through the double doors, just in case Helen did or said something weird. She had tried to talk to her once and Helen had called her a dull country gossip. Knowing that Helen was capable of loud outbursts for the slightest thing, she didn't want to start anything with that crazy old woman. So she avoided eye contact and walked quickly into the lobby.

Katherine methodically placed the shiny green leaves on individual clear glass plates. Katherine rinsed the Romaine and patted each leaf with a paper towel. Stephen had just pulled into the drive and she could hear the quiet hum of the garage door welcoming him home. As he walked toward the house, she smiled at him from behind the greenhouse window above the kitchen sink. The smell of herbs growing in the window gave the room a fresh essence, no matter what food was being prepared. Katherine enjoyed maintaining the house in a way that brought pleasure to her family and her many friends. She liked to leave her signature in every room and in the kitchen her herbs were her trademark. Like her, they were alive and useful and decorative.

"Did the meeting with Kirkland go well today?" Katherine asked as she pushed back a stray blonde hair from her forehead.

"Oh not as well as I'd hoped, but we did get the contract. We should be in production by mid-summer, but it means a lot of trips to Chicago to fine-tune the specs. I'll start making plans for just how often next week. Kirkland is supposed to call me later, so I'll have to leave dinner for awhile, but Phil and Molly won't mind - they know how busy I've been lately. Oh by the way, how was your first court day?" Stephen sat his briefcase on the floor under the small desk in the corner. Then he reached into the dishwasher to get a glass as he pulled a bottle of scotch from the cabinet. He moved with a subtle confidence and grace that Katherine had always admired. Stephen was competitive in his private life as well as his business and he believed that rigorous discipline was necessary for him to maintain his focus. His trim athletic body was the result of regular noon work-outs at the Winterborne YMCA, where he had been chairman of the capital fund campaign to add a weight-room, sauna and indoor running track to the existing facility.

Katherine lit up at the thought of describing her unusual day. "Wait until you hear! I was so nervous I could hardly hear what Judge Matthews said, but I was assigned an actual case. Let me finish this salad so I can tell you the whole thing."

Katherine methodically placed the shiny green leaves on individual clear glass plates and put them in the refrigerator to stay crisp until dinner. She then grabbed a glass and poured her own finger of scotch as Stephen pulled out an oak chair, loosened his red silk jacquard tie and motioned for her to join him at the round kitchen table. Katherine brushed some lint from the shoulder of his navy wool suit as she walked behind his chair and began talking.

"The woman Judge Matthews assigned to me is 93 years old. Her name is Helen and she lives alone at the Smiling Seniors Apartments. I know what she looks like, but I haven't talked to her yet. I just watched her for a couple of hours, while she walked to

town and back and I followed her in my car." Katherine took a deep swallow of scotch and she could feel a flush in her cheeks as she described the events to Stephen. Her mind had returned to the quiet atmosphere of the somber courtroom when she realized that Stephen had asked her a question.

"Did she see you?" Stephen could not imagine the merit in simply watching someone for a whole afternoon. It seemed so passive. So like Katherine.

"See me? What do you mean? Helen was muttering to herself and looking at the ground in front of her so she wouldn't trip. All she saw were the cracks in the sidewalk and the end of her wooden cane." Annoyed with his question, Katherine took a deep breath and looked away from him. It was so like Stephen to question her methods.

"Sorry, I didn't mean anything."

"Well, what I saw was interesting. Helen didn't do anything all that weird. I mean, it's weird for an old woman to walk eight blocks to town in the morning and afternoon, and it's weird to mutter and laugh along the way, but unless I was looking for her, I wouldn't have noticed her that much."

"So, what is it you're supposed to look for?"

"That's a good question. I'm not all that sure myself. I'm supposed to be objective, but I don't really have an assignment of what to find or not find. I just interview everybody who knows her and interview her and write a report about what I see and hear and believe."

"So this whole thing is about your gut reaction? I mean, smart as you are, you aren't exactly a trained professional in psychology or social work or anything. You're a regular person - you know: wife, mother, church leader. How does that make your opinion important for something like this?"

"Well, Judge Matthews seemed to think I was up to the task. Members of the Winterborne Women's League would not have been approved to be court advocates if we didn't meet the standards." Katherine gulped down the rest of her scotch and got up to

rinse her glass. She opened the glass door of the china cabinet and began setting out dishes for the evening meal. Her jaw was set in an obstinate attempt at complete silence, but she could not maintain it as she blurted out, "Sometimes, Stephen, I have been known to be resourceful and independent and intelligent. I guess since you're gone so much you don't get a chance to see it. Now please excuse me while I get ready for Phil and Molly to arrive. Your mail is on the desk in your study." She grabbed a pile of plates and marched into the dining room to concentrate on the proper alignment of forks and knives and glasses.

Stephen adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses, retrieved his thick stuffed briefcase and glided toward the study. He hoped this court assignment wouldn't take long. He had experience of other volunteer projects that Katherine had taken on and he knew how involved she could become. He wanted her full attention to return to her usual activities at home, so he could begin to plan some major new directions his business was taking. He would need her support and help as a full-time wife, not as a community hero. As he passed Katherine, he quietly muttered, "Let me know when they get here. I want to talk to Phil about something."

The large wooden door of his private retreat closed smoothly behind him as he reached in his pocket for his cell phone. The vibrant sounds of Wagner's *Der fliegende Hollander* began to drift from the room while Katherine returned to her meal preparation in the kitchen. As she brushed melted butter across the pale skin of the baking chickens, she wondered if Stephen had actually heard anything she said. His mind was usually racing ahead to his next phone call or drifting back to a conversation he had earlier in the day. She expected little personal support from Stephen. He performed his duties as husband and father with skill and pride. He enjoyed her well-kept house and their friends and their happy children. He probably loved her. But expecting him to be intrigued by events in her life was beyond his range. Katherine had adapted well to this part of their relationship because she still enjoyed his company and his energy and the standard of life

his business provided her. She had a network of casual friends and she was active in community and church groups. Katherine believed the trade-offs she accepted were fair and because she knew many of her friends envied her comfortable existence, she thought it selfish to complain. Still, sometimes when she was alone and wanted to talk about her most personal thoughts, she longed for a more intimate connection in her life. But now she forced herself back to the moment at hand and stirred the rice she had left on the warming plate. Then she hurried upstairs to change clothes before dinner.

Phil and Molly arrived at exactly seven o'clock and Phil was proudly carrying a bottle of Simi Sonoma County Chardonnay. He could always be counted on to supply the perfect wine, so one of Molly's jobs was to call ahead and find out what was being served whenever they were invited to dinner. Katherine hung their coats in the hall closet and called to Stephen to come join their friends. Phil laughed as he handed the wine to Molly. He said he would hunt Stephen down and drag him to the kitchen. He then disappeared into the study as Katherine and Molly walked together to the back of the house.

Molly couldn't wait to find out about the court assignment. "So Katherine, are you an official court detective?" "Oh, Molly, you know better than that. I'm not a detective at all. I'm not looking for clues to solve a mystery. I'm just observing a woman's behavior. I'm a glorified gossip in some ways." Katherine pulled two wineglasses from the cabinet and handed Molly a corkscrew.

As Molly poured their wine, Katherine retrieved the salads and set them on the table with oil and vinegar. She put fresh whole wheat rolls in the oven to warm and then sat down across from Molly. She liked it that her friend hardly took a breath between sentences. Molly's constant upbeat energy always lightened the mood of a room and it

was difficult to stay serious around her. The two women had spent many cheerful hours together, talking and laughing while finishing routine chores or running errands.

Molly chattered on, "But you get to ask private questions and make official reports. That sounds like detective work to me. So tell me all about it. Every gory detail."

"Molly, do you think I'm qualified to do this kind of work for the court?"

Molly had not expected such a serious question. "Well, Katherine, you've always been one of the brightest women I know - and you are so good at figuring people out. Why would you ask that? Has Stephen been picking on you again? Just tell him to go suck an egg or something. That's what you usually do anyway."

"Yes Molly, it was something Stephen said, but it doesn't matter really. And you know, I think I'm going to like this court advocate thing. It's so different from any project I've ever volunteered to do. Already I'm thinking of questions to ask and people to see and wondering how it will all turn out."

"So, what is she like? You did say it was a she, didn't you?" Molly grabbed the quilted hot pad from above the stove and lifted the rolls from the oven. She then placed them carefully into the insulated basket Katherine had given her.

"I'm so excited about getting started with this whole thing. Yes, the person I'm reporting on is a she and her name is Helen and her niece thinks she needs a guardian to handle her affairs. So now I'm supposed to check out the situation and describe what I see."

Molly sipped her wine and shook her head. Her loose dark curls moved lightly across her forehead. "I don't know, Katherine. How do you know what to look for? Does the judge give you questions to ask? I'm nervous about when I get my assignment. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"The Women's League got training at that seminar at the Holiday Inn last month when you were out of town, remember? You'll need to attend one of those sessions

before they'll let you be a court advocate. They talk about what it is; what you can and can't do; when you need to ask questions and how many hours each case should take. The training lasts all day and it really helps your confidence, even though it's still a scary thing to do." Katherine filled the water glasses as she talked.

"So how scary is this woman?"

"Not too bad. It's just hard to keep up with her. She walks all day and that's one of the reasons her niece thinks she's crazy. Helen is ninety-three and she walks with a cane in all kinds of weather and it takes her forever to get where she's going. I followed her today." Katherine started down the hall to the study to call the men to dinner.

Molly tore off a piece of warm roll and popped it into her mouth. Chewing on it, she called to Katherine from the kitchen, "Followed her? How did that feel? Was it strange?"

Katherine called back, "No worse than people-watching on a park bench I guess."

"Except that this was one person and you were actually following her."

"Come on guys. Time to eat," Katherine spoke loudly through the study door as an image of Helen's silhouette suddenly flashed through her mind. She wondered if the damp cold of the winter sidewalks seeped through those brown leather shoes to Helen's feet. She shook the picture from her mind and returned to the kitchen.

Phil and Stephen came laughing out of the study and began commenting on how good the food smelled and how hungry they were. Molly filled the men's wineglasses as Katherine pulled the chicken from the oven. The talk turned to weather and local politics and the cost of gasoline.

periodically to the regional office of H.U.D. Katherine decided to get the opinion of this government employee before she talked to Helen's neighbors. She was also required by the court to explain to Leslie Logan the reason she would be visiting the apartment complex on a regular basis over the next few weeks.

CHAPTER TWO

Leslie had been notified by Katherine Mitchell had been appointed to investigate Helen and would come by her office before beginning her

interviews in the building. Chris Mellon, the county social worker who specialized in

Helen paused before she stepped off the curb and onto the parking lot in front of the apartment building. There was that car again. The mysterious blond woman from yesterday was walking into the foyer. Helen watched the glass door close behind her. Who was she? Helen did not linger long with the question, though. People's behavior had long since ceased to amaze her. Curiosity was a pleasant phenomenon on occasion, but Helen did not pry into matters that did not immediately concern her. She looked from side to side before crossing the parking lot to begin her journey to the Black Forest Cafe.

It was a clear and pleasant late winter morning and she hoped to spot a robin soon. At least the fluffy energetic squirrels had stayed in the neighborhood all winter. Soon she could watch for fresh green crocus bursting through the earth near the corner of Main and Walnut Street. Any day now. Helen smiled at the thought and shouted a thank-you to the rich blue sky.

Katherine practiced her introduction to the manager of the Smiling Seniors Apartments building. She had learned that Leslie Logan was more than a building manager, she was the executive director for the local public housing authority. However, the only public housing in Winterborne, Wisconsin was this facility for the elderly. Rents were based on a formula established by H.U.D. and other federal regulations were mandated by an agreement with a local board of directors. Therefore, part of the work of the building manager was to maintain individual files on all tenants and report

periodically to the regional office of H.U.D. Katherine decided to get the opinion of this government employee before she talked to Helen's neighbors. She was also required by the court to explain to Leslie Logan the reason she would be visiting the apartment complex on a regular basis over the next few weeks.

Leslie had been notified by the court clerk that Katherine Mitchell had been appointed to investigate Helen and would come by her office before beginning her interviews in the building. Chris Mellon, the county social worker who specialized in problems of the elderly, had kept Leslie informed of possible legal actions to be taken concerning Helen. Over the past few months, Leslie had spent hours talking to Chris about what to do about the "Helen problem". Tenants at the Smiling Seniors continued to complain about Helen's odd behavior. The complaints ranged from foul language to threatening remarks to Helen's personal neglect of herself. Most of her neighbors believed that Helen belonged in a nursing home or a nut house. Leslie only knew that the complaints were taking an extraordinary amount of her time.

Leslie opened her office door and seemed surprised to encounter such an attractive and poised woman. Katherine smiled broadly and put out her hand to introduce herself and her court credentials. Leslie asked her to be seated in the straight metal chair across the desk from her. This was the usual placement of furniture, since most visitors were tenants who were there to pay the rent. The discomfort of the chair was intentional. It reduced minutes spent in idle conversation with elderly people who had a lot of time on their hands. Leslie had learned this trick at a H.U.D. workshop last spring and it was very effective at improving office efficiency.

Katherine took out her notebook to begin her first interview. "Leslie, thank you for this opportunity to get some background information about Helen. I think it's a good idea to get some facts from her file before I go out there and start collecting opinions."

Leslie scooted her chair back and reached out to pull open the bottom drawer in the cabinet behind her desk. She retrieved a thick manila file folder and opened it across

her desk. "Well, Mrs. Mitchell, I'll try to cooperate with the court any way I can. I know that whatever is decided, the other tenants will be pleased to know that some action is being taken."

"Thanks, Leslie. I'll try to keep my intrusions to a minimum and I've prepared a few questions to help get me started. First, I'd like to know how long Helen has lived here."

"Oh, she's been down the hall now a little over eight years. She moved in a few months after her sister Alpha died of cancer. Helen had come back to Winterborne to help take care of Alpha. Although she was too old even then to do the heavy work, she seemed to be the best choice at the time. Alpha's daughter Cora had moved with her husband to Chicago and she wasn't able to come back to stay with her mother. Since Helen had no family responsibilities back East, she came home to Wisconsin to help out."

"So where was Helen living when her sister became ill?"

Leslie rifled through the papers in the file until she was near the bottom. "Let's see. Here it is. Helen had lived in a suburb of Boston before she retired from teaching at a prep school for girls. She had taught for over forty years and still receives a generous pension. She also receives Social Security, which is very unusual for someone retired from education. Many teachers have state pension plans that exclude them from the federal program, but it was a private school where Helen taught. Maybe that's why she gets both."

"What did she teach? Does it say?"

"English and physical education. And she never married."

"Thanks. Do you know if she has any family besides Ann and her niece in Chicago?" Katherine was writing quickly and tried to get every detail Leslie mentioned.

"Not around here. But there is a great-niece living in South Dakota who Helen writes to regularly. Yes. Here it is. Let's see, she would be Alpha's granddaughter. I hear that Cora was nearly forty when she had her and Meredith can't be more than

twenty-three or so now. Her full name is Meredith Douglas."

Leslie looked up from the file to add an undocumented aside. "Some people think that Meredith is one of Helen's problems. It seems that Helen sends money to her every month. Quite a bit of money. A couple of hundred dollars from what I understand."

Katherine looked up from her notes. "Do you mean that Meredith is doing something illegal to get Helen's money? What do the rumors say?"

"Well you know, Helen has very little in her own life. Her kitchen cabinets are nearly bare and she usually has no food in her apartment. Ann Carter is worried that her aunt has no savings and is not prepared financially for an emergency. I can verify that part through government records, since I must have asset and income information for establishing rents. It's obvious that Helen lives on a shoestring, in spite of her regular income. So Ann may be correct in suspecting this young woman out in South Dakota."

"What does Helen say about it?"

Leslie stiffened in her padded desk chair as she replied, "Oh, Helen usually gets angry at whoever asks the question. She'll raise her cane in the air and shout that it's nobody's damn business how she spends her money."

"Then does she threaten to harm people with her cane?"

"She hasn't hit anyone here yet, but most people try to stay out of range just in case." "Well, sort of, except for the misuse of her money and her rudeness."

Katherine frowned and wrote this information into her record as she continued with her planned questions. "Do you have any specific reasons why you think Helen should be assigned a guardian?"

"Well, I've worked with older people for about ten years now. Helen is different from anyone I know. She doesn't have friends and she won't even eat lunch in the dining room so she can meet people. Someone from the kitchen carries her lunch to her on a tray and she eats it alone in her room. She's extremely anti-social and often says rude things to people she encounters in the hall. If she fell or became ill, it might take a long

time for anybody to realize it. Most people living here have networks of friends and family who watch out for them. These safeguards aren't available to Helen because of her stubborn independence. That alone may be justification for guardianship. She needs to have someone who will be responsible for her well-being, since she doesn't seem to care much about that herself."

Katherine looked up from her notes. "There must be some other compelling reason for Ann to take legal action. Do you know what made her go to the judge now?"

Leslie smiled a small, quick grin. Her tiny teeth and straight brown hair combined with the smile to make her look suddenly mouse-like. Katherine tried not to think of a small rodent as Leslie proceeded. "Well, apparently Ann has been getting lots of phone calls at home. Several people in town are worried about Helen's daily walks. She goes out to that cafe in all kinds of weather, even snow. People say she'll fall and break her hip or some other part of her 93-year old body. They think Helen's behavior is a little crazy and she needs protection from her own recklessness. After so many complaints, Ann finally decided that she had better take action before something really bad happens to Helen."

"So this petition to the court is to prevent something from happening, rather than a reaction to something that already happened?"

"Well, sort of, except for the misuse of her money and her rudeness."

Katherine placed her pen back in her briefcase and closed her notebook. "Leslie, you've been a great help to me. I feel like now I can ask informed questions when I talk to the people who live here. Can you recommend any residents for me to start with?"

"Well, I just saw the mail carrier leave, so I'm sure some people have already gathered outside my door. You can start there, if you like."

"Thanks, I'd like that a lot."

Leslie walked Katherine to the door and out into the foyer. On the opposite wall from Leslie's office was the bank of mailboxes. This area was a gathering spot for

friendly chatter and gossip, as people from the building made their daily pilgrimage to get mail. Leslie introduced Katherine to two women who had just entered the foyer. "Mary Yoder and Betsy Fuller, I'd like you to meet Katherine Mitchell. She's here to gather some information about Helen and I've given her permission to talk to residents who are interested in helping. You don't have to talk with her if you don't want to, but she seems like a very nice person."

Leslie smiled at the women and turned to go back to her office. "Oh Katherine, if you need a quiet area to conduct your interviews, I can let you use the game room. It's the third door down the hall to your right and it's not locked during the day. See you later."

Katherine was pleased to accept the offer and the three women made their way down the hall, exchanging small talk about the mild winter this year.

Mary and Betsy were sisters. Mary was a tall woman, slightly overweight and wearing a two-piece purple running suit. It had embroidered pink tulips on the bodice and she wore white orthopedic walking shoes. Mary had a confident laugh and carried herself as someone who had experienced a full life. Her short grey hair was permed and she wore a touch of eye shadow, mascara and lipstick. She shook Katherine's hand when they reached the game room and offered her the stuffed chair in the corner. Compared to her colorful sister, Betsy seemed like a pale shadow in the background. Shorter than Mary and more overweight, she wore simple cotton print dresses that she sewed herself. The style was the same for every dress and the fabrics were inexpensive yard goods. She never felt comfortable wearing makeup and she gave little thought to her hair. Betsy admired her sister's sense of color and style, but she never tried to imitate it. Mary and Betsy sat on two brown metal folding chairs which were part of the card table set in the middle of the small wood-paneled room. "What can Betsy and I do for you today?" Leslie said this is about Helen. So what do they plan to do with the crazy old bat?"

Betsy laughed at her sister's reference to Helen. Betsy knew that Mary was the

only person in the building who could say such a thing openly and continue the conversation in a friendly manner. Mary always said these things and nobody believed she meant them a bit. Mary was a good Christian woman. She had saved Betsy from utter devastation after her husband died and left Betsy in debt, with nowhere to live. Mary had made a couple of phone calls and got Betsy right into the Smiling Seniors, in spite of the waiting list. Usually it took a year to actually move in after you put your name on the list. Of course, the fact that Mary's son Jake was on the Board of Directors at the housing authority didn't hurt. It was good to have a sister with connections in high places.

Katherine was startled at the graphic description of Helen. "Why do you think Helen is crazy?"

Mary laughed softly. "She's different, isn't she? Isn't that what crazy is? There's nobody here that knows what to say to her to get her to talk decently to them. She was never married, so she has no children. She doesn't give a damn about her apartment or watch T.V. or even eat with the rest of us. Regular talk is impossible with that woman. She lives in another world. So I guess that means she's crazy. Or a snob."

Katherine looked up from her notes at that comment. "A snob? What do you mean?"

Mary leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees. "Helen's last name is Grant. Didn't you recognize it?"

Katherine shook her head.

Mary leaned back and laughed. "Well then, I guess that just proves you aren't a local. I suppose you only moved here to follow your husband's work or something, so let me fill you in a little. Grant is the same name as the historical museum down by the lake and that whole family goes back a long way. Old money. Not much about them in the Winterborne paper anymore, but they founded this town."

Katherine added this dimension to her descriptions. She thought for a moment

about how this fact might alter the public perception of Helen's situation.

"So why does she live here instead of with other family members?" She looked down. Mary sat back and laughed again. "Oh, that bunch. Ann and Helen have never been friendly. Ann is her niece, but the two of them are as different as night and day. Ann worries over the family reputation and what their legacy will be. You know, things like foundations and awards in their name. Sometimes I think Ann would like the town name changed to Grantville before she dies. Well, Helen never took any stock in all of that. She always lived her own life. With her father's blessing, she left for the East Coast and went to some fancy girls' school when she was a teenager. But years later when her dad died, he left all his money and property to Randolph, the only son and Ann's father. I don't suppose that fact makes Helen feel too friendly toward Ann, either. Ah, well, the grand problems of the rich."

Katherine suddenly put together parts of the local puzzle that were new to her. Ann Carter was a country club member and they had been on some committees together. Ann's married name was not the same as the historical museum and Katherine had not inquired much about her. But Ann's daughter, Rachael Morgan, was also a club member and active in various civic groups. Rachael was married to a local physician, so Katherine had always assumed that the doctor bought their ticket into the club. She now knew that Rachael had connections of her own. This small town life was getting more and more complicated. She realized both Rachael and Ann carried the burden of being related to crazy old Helen, who walked the streets all day causing public concern.

Katherine closed her notebook and rose to say good-bye to the sisters. "You have really helped me today. I plan to talk to some of Helen's other neighbors this morning, but I would like to talk to you both again some time. Would that be all right with you?"

Betsy smiled broadly at the idea that Katherine wanted to talk with her again and Mary put out her hand to Katherine. "You can knock on my door any time. It's apartment 218. Betsy doesn't have a phone, but we can usually find her somewhere in the building.

It was nice to meet you."

Katherine turned, leaving the two sisters chatting in the game room. She looked down the long hall to her left and decided to find Helen's apartment. As she turned to explore the building, she suddenly heard a man's voice fill the corridor. "Hello there, are you looking for someone special?"

Startled, Katherine looked behind her and saw a pleasant angular face, about to break into gentle laughter. He was a slender man in his mid-forties, carrying a small metal toolbox. He wore jeans and a pale chambray work shirt. His greying brown hair gave him an air of distinction and his smile was genuine and warm. "I didn't mean to frighten you, really. I work here and you looked a little lost."

Katherine regained her usual composure. "I'm sorry you thought I seemed lost. I'm not. I just need to check the numbers to find apartment 102. Since you work here, could you help me?"

He smiled broadly as he pointed straight ahead. "If you walk about twenty paces, you'll be in front of the door. That's Helen's place, but she isn't home right now. She's downtown at the Black Forest Cafe. She's there every day at this time. I'd be happy to give you directions to the restaurant, if you'd like."

Katherine felt that he was teasing her and she realized she didn't have a quick come-back. She had been concentrating on her work and was unprepared for banter. "Thank you. I'll check later and see if she's made it back. I appreciate your help in locating her apartment for me."

"You're welcome. I'll be glad to answer any other questions you may have. I know everybody in the building and where they've hidden all their skeletons. I'm Neal Parker and my apartment is number 137, at the other end of the hall."

Katherine turned quickly and walked toward the foyer and Leslie's office. This man had made her feel disoriented and she did not quite know why. Maybe Leslie could tell her about him. When she knocked on the office door there was no answer, so she

would have to try again later. As she stood there, Katherine overheard a conversation between two women who were collecting their mail for the day.

The first woman, Sue Brinkman, leaned forward to speak confidentially. "Did you hear about what she did last night?"

The second woman, Alice Lawlor, took the bait. "No, I haven't heard anything yet today. Did she finally hit somebody? I know that cane of hers scares me to death."

Sue looked over her shoulder before answering in a loud whisper which Katherine could clearly hear. "Agnes Snyder and Clara Simmons had been shopping at the Kroger Store and decided to help Helen by buying her some food for her kitchen. You know, I was in there once myself and there is absolutely no food in Helen's cupboards or refrigerator."

Katherine decided to stop spying as she walked purposefully up to the women. "Excuse me, you are talking about Helen Grant, aren't you?"

The women pulled apart and began to walk away. Katherine smiled broadly and called to them. "Please, ladies, I am here on official business that has to do with Helen. Judge Matthews wants me to find out everything I can about her life here at the Smiling Seniors. I'm allowed to ask people about any information they have that could help me. I would really like it, and so would the judge, if you could finish your story for me."

The women looked at each other and mutually nodded an affirmation that Katherine could listen to the piece of gossip they had been sharing. Sue continued, "Well, Agnes and Clara bought a whole bag of food, with their own money, not expecting any kind of payment or anything from Helen in return. They were doing their good Christian duty by her."

Alice chimed in. "Yes, Pastor Elliot said in his sermon just last Sunday that giving is better than receiving. I've always liked that message. And he does it so well. I nearly know it by heart."

Sue looked sternly at Alice and continued. "Well, they knocked on the door and

waited for Helen to answer. When she finally did, they handed her the bag of food and then they left right away, so Helen didn't have time to argue or anything. They said it felt so good to know that they had done something so unselfish and helpful. Now Helen would be able to cook herself breakfast, instead of walking all the way to town. There were eggs and sausages in the bag, as well as cookies, pancake flour and cereal. Clara had even thrown in her favorite brand of maple syrup as a special treat."

Katherine interrupted. "So is that what happened? I mean, is that your story? Do neighbors help Helen like that a lot and try to watch out for her?"

The first woman laughed a cynical little flurry of short snorts. "Hardly. Agnes and Clara had gone out on a limb this time. But they were feeling really generous after that sermon and all. In fact, they were the most hurt by what happened next."

"And what was that?"

"Wow. Never in my life, and I've lived forever, have I seen anything so rude and crazy. Someone ought to do something about that woman. Helen had the gall to take the bag of groceries and get rid of everything in it. She started knocking on doors all down the hall and giving people food from the bag. She would ring the doorbell with her cane, and when the person answered, she would reach inside the bag and hand them something - a box of cereal, a dozen eggs, maple syrup. People didn't know what on earth she was doing, so most of them just accepted the stuff and closed the door. She gave away everything she'd been given except a bag of Windmill cookies. Those she put in the trash. Can you imagine? In the trash! And food costing what it does today. I wonder what Pastor Elliot would think of that!"

Sue just shook her head then and rolled her eyes in disbelief at such foolish behavior.

Alice made another point. "Now I guess it won't be anybody else's fault if they just find Helen starved to death someday, with no food at all in her kitchen."

Katherine tried to get every detail of this story into her notes. The two women

left the foyer muttering about Helen's weird behavior, as Katherine sat down on one of the orange plastic couches in the open gathering area. She would speak to Agnes and Clara to verify this information, but the story did seem unusual. It raised many questions for her. Had the neighbors tried to show such consideration before and been rejected? Did Helen really go without food? Did Helen ever go to a doctor or show symptoms of malnutrition? How many other "crazy Helen" stories would she hear?

Katherine was engrossed in her notes and mulling over the things she had been told, when she suddenly realized she was no longer alone in the open foyer. She heard the heavy front door close and saw Helen, who had returned from her morning walk and was catching her breath just inside the entry. Katherine remained seated as Helen moved across the tile floor toward her apartment. Then Helen paused a few feet in front of Katherine and turned to speak to her. Helen's deep blue eyes sparkled in amusement as she lifted her cane in a mock salute. "Hello there. I wondered if I would ever see you as more than a shadow on the horizon. You do seem to be everywhere I go. Have you been following me? Can I help you with something?" Katherine caught her breath. She had no idea that the old woman had noticed her. She thought she had been very discreet. She stood to shake Helen's hand as she realized she felt awkward and embarrassed. "Why, ah, yes. You can help me with something. I would like to talk to you, if you don't mind spending some time with me, and I'm sorry if you thought I was following you. Oh, my name is Katherine Mitchell and I am pleased to finally meet you, Helen." Helen did not return Katherine's welcoming gesture. She placed both hands on the top of her cane, planted it firmly on the floor in front of her and looked angrily at Katherine. Helen's eyes were no longer sparkling with amusement. They were hard and fierce. Her wrinkled jaw was set and she hissed through her aged yellow teeth. "How do you know my name? Who told you to talk to me? I don't even know you. What are you up to?"

Katherine had not expected a confrontation and she was totally unprepared for it. Suddenly, she understood the fear she had heard in the voices of Helen's neighbors. She blushed and stepped back from Helen. "Please excuse my presumptions, ma'am. I was sent by Judge Matthews to get to know you and report back to him. This all has to do with Ann's court action. You do know about it, don't you? I mean, you were officially notified or something?"

Helen turned and began to walk across the foyer again. She tilted her head to the side and muttered to Katherine. "Oh, that. I should have known. The woman won't be happy until I am put away. I've embarrassed her for a long time."

Katherine did not respond. She simply watched the old woman walk slowly away from her. Helen wore her usual outfit and the plaid pleated skirt hung to just below her bony knees. Through the thick support hose, Katherine could see nearly transparent pale skin which showed deep blue veins running the length of her slender calves. Stockings couldn't hide the wear and tear displayed on those legs and ankles. Katherine stared at the worn limbs moving slowly away from her, until Helen rounded the corner and was no longer visible.

After Helen left her, Katherine sat down again on the orange plastic sofa. This time she did not write anything in her neat notebook. She simply took several deep breaths and tried to regain her usual composure. She had just encountered an energy remarkable in a woman of that age. She was stunned by the reality of the woman's presence. Katherine was not sure how to write the words in her notes to reflect the impact of this first meeting with Helen.

Suddenly, Katherine heard a man's laughter as she turned to face Neal. He was shaking his head and walking toward the sofa. "So you finally met Queen E. You look like one of those deer, caught in the headlights. She's something, isn't she?"

Katherine was annoyed at his presence. "If you mean Helen, yes. I just met her for the first time. I'd been warned that she could be unfriendly, so I wasn't really

surprised."

"Of course you were surprised. You're a nice lady and she had no reason to treat you rudely."

"Well, that much is true and I was trying to be polite. I even apologized for any misunderstanding I may have caused. She is something."

Neal took the liberty of pulling up a lime green plastic chair as he sat it in front of Katherine's perch. "Mary Yoder told me you're here because Judge Matthews sent you. Is that true?"

Katherine sat back on the sofa and took a deep breath. She needed some time to sort out her first impression of Helen. She could get some more information from this man, as unsettling as he was. "Mary was telling you the truth. I'll be visiting different people in the building for the next few weeks. So Neal, are you the Smiling Seniors maintenance man? I saw your tools earlier and you seem to know everybody."

Neal laughed again and leaned forward to look at Katherine as he spoke. "Hey, you're pretty good at reading the evidence. Maybe you can paint an accurate picture of Helen if you spend enough time here. And you're correct. I'm the person in charge of maintaining the facility and answering distress calls at all hours of the day and night. I do know everyone who lives here and I like to think of them as my friends. May I ask what your name is?"

Katherine nodded and smiled as she put out her hand to Neal. "I'm Katherine Mitchell and I would like it if you thought of me as your friend as well. I'm pleased to meet you, Neal. Would you be willing to talk to me about Helen? So far, I have a pretty good case for having someone come for her soon. Especially after my own less than pleasant conversation with her."

Neal shook her hand and sat back in his chair to continue their conversation. "Don't expect much pleasant conversation from Queen E. She's not all that happy to be here. I think that mostly she's homesick."

Katherine was struck by that description. "And why do you call her Queenie? Is it because of her arrogance or her heritage?"

Neal laughed again and paused before he answered. "Actually, it isn't 'Queenie' - it's 'Queen E.', as in Queen Elizabeth. You know, old Henry VIII's daughter. The Virgin Queen. It's sort of a personal joke between Helen and me."

"You joke with Helen about her being a virgin?"

"I'm not sure she is. She never married, but there's plenty of fire and knowledge in that old woman, so I wouldn't care to bet on it. No, the Queen reference has to do with history and conflict and misunderstandings among the masses. Helen was an English teacher for over 40 years, you know. She likes my comparison and she laughs at it. I usually think of Helen as a fine example of a modern Queen E., caught out here in the boondocks without her army. After all, in times like these, where is a good knight when you need one?"

Katherine tried to figure out what he was talking about. "So the two of you make jokes about English history?"

Neal sighed. "Yea, something like that."

"Did I miss something?"

"I do hope you don't miss a thing, Ms. Mitchell."

Neal stood up and put the chair back where he had found it. "I just got beeped, but I really would like to continue this conversation later, if you don't mind."

Katherine was suddenly curious about many of his comments. She felt that he had presented her with riddles and was giving her time to consider them. "I plan to visit Helen within the next few days. If you are available then, I would be happy to continue our conversation."

Neal put out his hand to say good-bye. "Thank you for the offer and I'll expect to see you soon. I guess you know where to find me, but if I'm not here in the lobby or outside on the grounds or in the halls, just page me. The number is 257-1021. And

seriously, good luck."

As she watched Neal walk away, Katherine took a deep breath and gathered her belongings. She felt more tired than if she had cleaned house all day. She looked forward to a long hot bath and an hour of Mozart before welcoming Stephen home and preparing dinner.

CHAPTER THREE

Stephen knocked lightly on the bathroom door, "Katherine, will you be long? I have some great news and we need to talk about it tonight. I can take you to the club for dinner, if you haven't made other plans."

Katherine placed her wineglass on the edge of the tub as she sat upright in the sea of bubbles she had just eased into. "You can come on in, Stephen. I'm just relaxing and the club sounds fine. So, what's going on?"

Stephen stepped into the small steamy room. His crisp white shirt and shiny leather shoes seemed out of place in this haven of warm terry cloth and floral fragrances. But he didn't pay much attention to his surroundings as he talked rapidly and seemed distracted by his pacing thoughts. "It's that deal I've been working on all week. We still have the contract, but they want to push the deadline for set-up to May. That's a real stretch for us and it's going to mean lots of extra hours for everybody. You and I need to compare calendars over dinner and see what we need to cancel or reschedule. I know we had that week in San Francisco set for April, but Phil and Molly will understand if we wait 'til fall."

Katherine suddenly stopped relaxing. "Stephen, that trip was to celebrate their anniversary. I don't think we can change their wedding date from April to September retroactively. They made the reservations months ago and we've had great fun planning the whole trip. Are you sure we should disappoint them?"

"C'mon Katherine, you know they're our best friends. Phil will understand that this is business and we can do it later."

"Fine, but I'm not going to tell them. It's your emergency, so it's your responsibility to let them know. I'm not your secretary." Katherine reached for her wine, took a sip and sank back down into the water. She closed her eyes and began to hum.

Muttering, Stephen turned away. "I guess I'll go call Phil. We can leave for the club in an hour."

CHAPTER THREE

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Katherine finished her wine and turned up the music being pumped into the bathroom through built-in speakers. She tried to drown the image of Molly's face when she heard that her plans for the four of them had been canceled. Stephen could never be counted on to keep his word when business interceded. He breezily assumed that family and friends would always understand and forgive him. Most of the time he was right.

"I'm sure I don't deserve them."

Ann turned to Katherine and surprised her by saying, "Would you two care to join us for dinner?" Stephen and Katherine entered the large foyer of the Golden Hills Country Club and handed their coats to the attendant inside the door. Other couples and small groups had gathered in the area before being seated for dinner. The grand piano in the corner was filling the room with gentle music, courtesy of the local high school band instructor, who moonlighted here Thursday through Sunday evenings. He was saving money to send his three daughters to college and he really enjoyed playing the piano. This job was his secret joy. Publicly, he took pleasure in bearing the sacrifice of this second job to improve his family's future. Privately, he knew that his club evenings gave him an opportunity to escape the chaotic atmosphere at home and become one with the music he produced. He smiled and nodded to people as they entered and gave special energy to his work when they interrupted their conversations to actually listen to him.

Katherine scouted the group of club members who were milling around the room. She hoped to see Ann Carter. She thought a social encounter might be a good place to

hear some comments from Ann about her aunt Helen. Katherine got lucky. There were Ann and her husband, just coming up from the lounge downstairs.

Katherine touched Stephen's elbow and led him toward Ann and Ralph.

Ann noticed that they were being approached, so she paused and waited for Katherine and Stephen to join them. "Good evening, Katherine. I'm glad to see you here tonight. Hello, Stephen. Ralph, you remember Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, don't you?"

Ralph nodded as he shook hands with them and smiled warmly. "How could I forget such a gracious lady as Katherine? I heard you report to the Board about that children's clothing drive you chaired. You are an eloquent speaker, madam. And your project was quite successful, as I recall."

Katherine smiled broadly at the lavish compliment from such a highly-placed member of the community. She hoped Stephen was listening. "Thank you for your kind words, sir. I'm sure I don't deserve them."

Ann turned to Katherine and surprised her by saying, "Would you two care to join us for dinner? I'm sure you have many questions for me, Katherine. This seems like as good a place as any for you to conduct your initial interrogation of me. Maybe Ralph can be of some help as well. What do you think, dear?"

Ralph delighted in his wife's ability to get right to the point. She was sometimes blunt in her forthrightness, but she always said exactly what was on her mind. "I think that would be a grand idea. I'll ask them to set a table for four, instead of two."

Stephen was not happy. He had requested time to talk about something important this evening and he hoped his wife's social connections weren't about to get in his way. "Katherine, remember our plan for this evening's dinner? Maybe we could do this another time."

Katherine glanced his way and smiled, "This will work just fine, Stephen. You and I can discuss that other matter when we get home. Yes, Ann, we shall be happy to join you."

Ralph came back and told them their table was available in the main dining room.

Dinner took on its usual rhythms of small talk and food selections and observations on the quality of the meal. Then coffee was poured and some real conversation began. Ann again made the first move. "So Katherine, have you talked to Helen yet?"

"Well we've exchanged words, but I'm not sure you could call it talking. It was more like an encounter. She wasn't happy with me and I guess I can't blame her. Let's just say that we didn't get off to a good start."

Ann laughed. "With that woman, I'm not sure there is such a thing as a good start. She has her own way of looking at things. Were you able to get any information from Leslie Logan or Chris Mellon?"

"Yes, I did talk to Leslie, but I haven't met Chris. I talked to some of Helen's neighbors in the building and I met Neal Parker. He seems to know her quite well."

Ann frowned at the mention of Neal's name. "Be careful of that one. He's around the place day and night and he thinks he knows more than he does. We've had our differences in the past and I'm tempted to go to the Housing Authority Board to ask for his dismissal. He's very uppity for a janitor."

"Oh, I think he does more than just clean the halls. I mean, I think he maintains the property."

"Well, I don't care what his official duties are. I just think he should mind his own business."

Ralph decided it was time to diffuse the impending outburst he recognized building in his wife's words. He reached over and placed his hand over Ann's on the white linen surface of the table. "So Dear, when did you last speak to Helen?"

Ann looked up at him and smiled sheepishly, then she directed her answer to his question toward Katherine. "I'm not sure, exactly. It may have been during the Christmas holiday. I tried to get her to join us for Christmas Eve Dinner, but of course

she cursed at me and declined. She wouldn't even let me into her apartment. When she finally answered my knock, she just stood in the doorway, blocking my entrance. She's treated me like that for about four years now - ever since Meredith got married. And I don't care what Helen says, I still think no girl should marry so young, even if the young man is a decent sort."

Katherine recognized that name from her interviews. "Leslie mentioned someone named Meredith. Isn't she the niece Helen sends money to?"

"Yes, she is. I'm not sure what hold she has over Helen, but Meredith is draining that old woman of all her resources. I know Helen hasn't been able to save a dime."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, I know the numbers. I know how much she gets from her pension and social security and how much she spends on rent and food. Aunt Helen should have about \$600.00 left at the end of each month, but she mails a check to Meredith like clockwork on the 3rd and the check is for \$500.00. Certain people at the bank have shared those figures with me and it's one of the main reasons I decided to go to court. Someone has to protect Helen from herself and from Meredith."

Katherine paused as she thought about who at the bank gave her the numbers.

"Do you have other concerns, I mean besides the money?"

Ann sat back in her chair and sighed. "I wish she were somewhere safe. I think it's very dangerous for her to walk all over town like she does. You know of course that she walks even on the hottest days of the summer, when everyone else is planted in an air-conditioned room. And then she walks during the harshest weeks of winter, when ice is covering everything and she could fall any time. People tell me how often they see her and they all wonder why I can't stop her."

Ralph patted Ann's hand and decided it might be time to change the subject altogether. "So Stephen, how's your business doing? I see you're adding space to your facility. That usually means good news."

Stephen jumped at the chance to talk about something interesting. He sat up in his chair and smiled broadly as he described the success of his company. "As a matter of fact, things are going very well for us right now. We just signed a contract with a new customer. If the project proceeds as planned, it could lead to even more growth within the next couple of years. It keeps me pretty busy, though. I can't wait for the weather to warm up again, so I can relax out there on the greens."

Ralph laughed and nodded. "I know just how you feel. Ann and I are taking a couple weeks in Florida next month to play some golf and absorb some sun. We have a little house on the beach and our neighbors down there are fine people."

"Well, this year I won't be playing much. But the pay-off next year should make it worth the sacrifice. Do you know if Doug Littlefield bought that new set of clubs he was talking about? He seemed real excited about their potential to improve his game."

The conversation turned to after-dinner chatter as Katherine thought about Helen's slow pace on the ice-covered walks. What would make someone take such risks at that age? Was she a little crazy?

As they rose to leave, Ann paused to speak to Katherine, "Could I call you next week to meet for lunch? I'd like to discuss Helen some more, if we could."

Katherine was relieved that Ann had initiated the request. She had many more questions to ask her. "I'm available any time next week. Just give me a call and we can plan the details. I'd be happy to continue our conversation and get to know you a little better."

Stephen did not speak to Katherine during their trip home. He slammed the door behind him as he entered the house and barked at Katherine as he hung his coat beside hers in the hall closet. "Do you think you could interrupt your important volunteer work long enough to discuss our personal life? I thought we were going to dinner to make

some plans. Why did you change our whole evening like that?"

Katherine brushed past him and walked into the large living room. She sat in one of the two wing chairs flanking the fireplace, removed her shoes and curled her legs under her. Resisting his effort to bait her into defending herself, she looked up at Stephen and spoke quietly. "I am at your service now. You have my total attention. Please have a seat and describe your problem to me."

Effectively intercepted by her comment, Stephen plopped himself down on the other wing chair and began his description of the coming months. "I'll be commuting regularly to their plant in Chicago and I'll start making those trips next Monday. That means I'll have to keep up with business here by phone and go into my office on weekends. Its going to be a lot like that Lancaster deal two years ago."

Katherine recalled the Lancaster period. She had filled her time with family and friends and developed a solitary existence at home. By then, Amy was away at school and the empty nest had begun. She hadn't minded the days, since she kept herself very busy whether Stephen was in town or not. But the nights became eternal. She didn't hear Stephen on the phone or his music coming from the study. She didn't worry about dinner or if he had a clean shirt for the next day. She didn't hear his quiet breathing or feel an occasional restless kick in the bed beside her. She read a lot during that period and rented every old movie she could think of. She remembered the Lancaster period as a very dreary time. Certainly Katherine did not look forward to months of such limbo again. Then she remembered Helen and the court report. She had work to do and she could use the evenings to review her notes and write her report. Since Stephen wasn't too excited about her assignment, it might be better to have him gone most of the time. It wouldn't be exactly like the Lancaster period after all.

Katherine brightened at her sudden revelation. "I think I can manage without you, Stephen. I have more activities in my life to keep me busy this time, so I'll do my best not to pout and feel neglected."

"That isn't what I meant exactly. I had a different idea about how to handle the situation. You could come along this time. Chicago has always been a great place for you to explore. You could find plenty to keep you busy during the day and we could do plays and concerts and dinners at night. I could find a little apartment downtown and we could both commute back here for weekends. What do you think? Are you interested?"

Katherine was delighted by the offer. It was a total surprise and very unlike Stephen. "You know I love Chicago. It sounds wonderful. Why didn't you tell me this part earlier?"

Stephen sighed and leaned toward her. "I guess I had planned in my head just how I would surprise you with it over dinner. Then, you got that notion to eat with the Carters and the whole thing was ruined. I was the one pouting this time. So, you are open to the idea?"

Katherine pulled her feet from under her and sat upright. Smiling at Stephen, she walked over and kissed him on the forehead. "Sometimes you really do surprise me. This gives me lots to think about. I'll pull my calendar out in the morning and see how much needs to be canceled. I'm ready for bed; how about you?"

Stephen rose from his chair to follow her upstairs. "Did you remember the Monet exhibit that starts at the Chicago Art Institute in April? I can picture you as a regular there for a month or so. I wonder if they have a subscriber discount of some kind."

Katherine turned to kiss him on the mouth after that comment. "Thanks, Stephen. You've been putting a lot of thought into this."

Katherine liked the feel of her smooth satin gown against Stephen's naked body. She pushed her leg into his and he pushed instinctively back, slipping against the fabric as she glided her foot between his calves. Their motions were as natural as the habits of years become. She hesitated as she waited for his searching fingers to find their mark

and then she raised her knee to let the soft shadow of cloth drape into a pool beneath her leg. She lifted the small of her back toward him and invited him to hurry to her warmth and sudden wetness. She hadn't been thinking of making love tonight, but his sweet gesture of planning a Chicago Dream made her want to pull him into her. It became her private thank you to him, as well as a selfish celebration of her good fortune.

After Stephen left for work, Katherine walked toward the living room to open the blinds. Katherine hummed lightly as she prepared breakfast for Stephen. The sun glimmered through the herb-filled window as the smell of coffee signaled the start of the work day. Katherine hadn't felt this happy in quite a while. Most of the time, Stephen saw business as business and his personal life was kept completely separate. He never called from work just to say hello. He would consider it a hindrance to his total concentration. He was a very disciplined person and liked to sort his life into identifiable boxes. Katherine was amazed at this planned Chicago overlap. Had Stephen reached some middle-age crisis? She laughed at that thought. If there was one thing he wasn't, it was introspective. He believed that a person should just live life, not dissect it.

Stephen walked into the kitchen and poured his first cup of black coffee. "Well, last night turned out pretty well after all. I'll talk to you tonight about the details of Chicago. I don't have any plans for this evening - do you?"

"No, I'll make a light supper and we can spread out our calendars and lists on the desk in the study. Amy is driving over from school, but she'll be gone by the time you get home."

"Oh, I'm sorry I won't be here to see her. Tell her hello and that Daddy still misses her. And if you get the opportunity, without sounding like a Gestapo agent, you might inquire about those grades. She did promise to perform some miracles this semester. And while you're at it, find out if she's decided to spend the summer in Spain with that exchange program. We'll need to get her flight booked early if we want a good

discount."

Katherine placed Stephen's breakfast on the table in front of him. "That's one of the things we plan to talk about. But I feel like every time I talk to her there are a million things going on in her life and I can't keep up with them all. Right now, I think she's most excited about the skiing trip to Colorado next weekend. But I'll remember to ask about her G.P.A. and Spain."

After Stephen left for work, Katherine walked toward the living room to open the blinds and let the sun fill the house this bright winter morning. As she turned down the hall, she spotted her new leather briefcase sitting just inside the front door and stopped dead in her tracks. "My God, I can't leave town. I need to prepare for Helen's court date. What was I thinking? How could I have forgotten it so easily? Damn. I need to tell Stephen and he's not going to like it."

Pausing just inside the door, she began a conversation with him. "Thank you. I didn't know you were also the doorman for the building. So what other duties does Louis assign?" "Good morning, Queen E. Lovely day for a stroll, don't you think?" Neal was replacing an outdoor floodlight as Helen made her way down the front walk.

"Oh, it's better than it was yesterday. Just how many of those blasted lights are there? They light up this place like some county jail. I haven't been able to look out my window and see the stars ever since you put those dreadful things out here."

"C'mon, Helen. This is for your safety. It keeps all those bad guys from lurking under your window at night."

Helen laughed. "I think I would trade that risk for a peek or two at the Milky Way. Damn Old People. Scared of their own shadows."

"So, Queen E., when do you plan to get old?"

"You'll know, Neal. I'll drop you a note and you can come visit me at The Home."

Helen walked down the sidewalk toward Walnut Street, muttering under her

breath about old people and stars. Neal chuckled and returned to his work on the light. Katherine pulled up to the apartment house, just as Helen made it to the street. Before she parked the car, Katherine had considered driving up to Helen and offering her a ride to town, but then she thought better of it. Their last conversation had not created the base for such a friendly gesture. Instead, Katherine decided to wait until Helen returned home before speaking with her.

Neal was entering the building as Katherine arrived and he waited to hold the door for her. Katherine found his broad smile and sparkling eyes annoying, but she wasn't sure why. He had not been rude to her and he seemed to get along well with the residents of the apartment complex. Yet she felt as if he knew things he wasn't telling her and she wondered what her interview with him would be like. She then decided there was no time like the present to find out.

Pausing just inside the door, she began a conversation with him. "Thank you. I didn't know you were also the doorman for the building. So what other duties does Leslie assign to keep you busy? Do you maintain the parking lot or do they hire someone to plow it when it snows?"

Neal laughed out loud at that question. "No, no. She doesn't hire that out. I plow the lot myself and frankly, it's one of the reasons I took this job. I enjoy putting the blade to the asphalt at dawn and making big piles of snow in that great empty corner over there. It's like building a massive monster snow fort and they pay me to do it. Just don't tell anyone my little secret, O.K.? I'd hate to have them ruin my fun."

Katherine smiled and promised to keep his secret. Then she asked, "Do you have any spare time today? I would like to ask you some questions about Helen, if I could."

"Oh, sure. I've been working since 5:00 this morning. One of the furnaces was acting up, so I can take a long coffee break about now, if that fits your schedule."

Katherine had not expected such a quick response, but she was pleased to get the interview. "Sure, I tend to talk to people as I find them available, so this works great for

me. Where can we find some coffee?"

"How does the game room sound? I'll run down to the dining hall and bring us back a carafe and some cups. Do you need sugar or cream?"

"No. I like it straight up."

"O.K. The room is open. Just let yourself in. I won't be long."

Katherine was beginning to think of the game room as her interview room. It was a little stark, but it did serve the purpose. She would try to ignore the paint-by-number art hanging on the walls.

"

"Wait right here. I'll go to my apartment and call her."

Neal was back within five minutes, easily maneuvering the tray filled with the coffee service in one hand, while he gently closed the door behind him with the other. Katherine noticed his dexterity and the easy way his slender body moved. She guessed he was in his early 40's. He set the tray on the table and poured two cups of coffee into plain white ceramic mugs - H.U.D. issue.

He handed Katherine her coffee and this time his wide grin didn't seem to be hiding anything. "I'm all yours for an hour or so. How can I help you?"

Katherine blushed with the sudden comfort she felt in his presence. In response, she sat straighter in her chair and pulled her notebook from her briefcase. "You could start by telling me about Helen's apartment. Is it true she has no food?"

"Well, I know she doesn't cook, so I guess it would follow that she doesn't keep much food around. I go in there for maintenance work sometimes, but I don't usually look through her cupboards. She doesn't have a phone or a television, but she does have a radio she plays. She spends most of her time walking downtown and writing letters to her niece in South Dakota."

He watched Katherine write down as much as she could capture of his words. He paused to give her time to catch up. "What else do you need to know about the place? It's

not dirty or anything. She pays Sheila Baker to come in every couple weeks to dust and run the vacuum. Sheila's a waitress at the Black Forest and she's a friend of mine."

Katherine seemed interested in this news. "Really? No one else has mentioned her at all. Do you think she'd be willing to talk to me?"

Neal smiled at the question. "Sure. I think almost everybody in town knows Sheila. She's a good person. Her family has owned the Black Forest for as long as anyone can remember. I can call her to set something up, if you'd like."

"I'd like that very much. If you can arrange it for this afternoon, I'd like it even better."

"Wait right here. I'll go to my apartment and call her."

Katherine used the few minutes he was gone to organize her notes and her thoughts. Neal seemed to genuinely like Helen and he even appeared to have a friendship with her. But then he was generally friendly to all the tenants. She was getting closer to her first real interview with Helen and she wanted as much background material as possible before that happened. He might be one of the best resources for general information and besides, Katherine was also becoming curious about Neal himself. After speaking with him for even a short time, she realized that he was probably well educated and capable of work beyond the level of maintenance worker. She wondered why he was living here at the Smiling Seniors complex.

Neal returned with good news for her. She was welcome to go over to the restaurant right now, before the lunch rush began. Sheila would be there and they could talk for awhile. Katherine hurriedly gathered her things and thanked Neal for making this connection for her. Neal collected the coffee mugs and followed Katherine out into the hall. "I hope we get a chance to finish our talk soon. I know Helen pretty well and I would like to share some ideas I have about this whole business. Could you come back tomorrow?"

"I could come back today, if you'd like."

"I'd like that very much, but I have an appointment this afternoon. I can bring us coffee Monday morning, though. This time I'll provide my special blend and we can share some really good coffee."

"Thanks. As far as I know, I'm free Monday morning. I can be here at 9:00, if that works for you."

"9:00 sounds fine. I look forward to it. Good-bye and good luck with Sheila."

Katherine watched him disappear into the dining room down the hall. He was a cordial host and an energetic man. She again wondered why he lived here.

"Of course the old lady's nuts. Aren't you? I know I am. Do you mind if I smoke?" It didn't really matter if Katherine minded, because Sheila lit up anyway. They were sitting at the back of the diner and there were only a couple of customers left near the middle of the room. They were more involved in their conversation than their food and they were comfortable regulars who could get their own coffee refills.

Sheila appeared to be in her mid-thirties and had thick dark hair, pulled back in a careless ponytail. Her mouth looked ready to break into a new smile every few minutes and she was very relaxed in her slightly overweight frame. If her family hadn't owned the place, any dining establishment would have wanted her to serve their customers. As waitresses go, she was a natural.

"Oh, well, I guess I can let you smoke in your own restaurant." Katherine reached down to retrieve her notebook from her briefcase. Sheila admired Katherine's fine wool coat and silk scarf. Most of the Black Forest's diners wore insulated nylon jackets to keep out the blowing cold Wisconsin winters. This smooth camel sheath embodied elegance in Sheila's opinion.

"Like I said, she is probably a little crazy. It isn't exactly sane of her to walk outside in some of this weather. But, if you talk much to most people, there's something

Sheila stopped and inhaled some more grey smoke before she continued. She exhaled slowly and watched the cloud escape toward the ceiling. "When she first started coming here, she brought in this special little egg holder. She said she bought it in London years ago and would I serve her a soft-boiled egg in it? Of course I could, so that's what I give her every day for breakfast. She takes her dear old time getting to it, but she seems to enjoy the process of opening that egg as much as she enjoys eating it. She also wants orange juice, milk and an English muffin with marmalade. After she's finished with that, she drinks black coffee. Usually three cups of it all together. Seems like an O.K. breakfast, but I'd get bored with the same thing every day."

"Does she ever bother people while she sits there? I mean, does she insult them or make them feel uncomfortable? That seems to happen a lot at the apartments."

"Helen? Oh, she watches people out on the street and makes comments about them under her breath sometimes. What she says usually makes people smile. She's right more times than not. Of course the same people who smile at her comments when they are in here are her targets when they leave. Most folks don't mind, though, from what I can tell."

"They say she comes back in the afternoon. Does she eat then?"

"Oh, yeah. But not the same thing every day, like at breakfast. Helen likes something sweet in the afternoon. She calls it her "tea time". She orders hot tea and I try to find a dessert for her. She really likes cake or pie, but sometimes I only have pudding or cookies. She comes in at about 4:00 and only stays for an hour or so. Then, before she leaves, I give her two slices of whole wheat bread wrapped in plastic. She puts that in her pocket for later. I think she said she has tea and toast before bed most nights."

"How does she pay for her meals? Does she carry cash around?"

Sheila put out her cigarette in a quick easy motion as she answered. "No. Helen pays for her food once a month. We keep a tab and she covers it on the 3rd. We do that for some other people who get Social Security. It's a little bookkeeping for us, but it

makes life a lot easier for them. With Helen, I just add my charge for cleaning her apartment to the ticket. It's worked great for us so far. Did you need to see our records?"

Katherine smiled at her willingness to share this information with a stranger.

"No, I'll take your word for it. I'm not the sheriff, after all. I just wanted to know how Helen's life works. Does she pay by check?"

"Yeah, I fill out the top part and she signs it."

Katherine started to put her notebook away and paused for a moment. "Thanks for your help. I learned a lot from you. If I have more questions later, could I bother you again?"

Sheila smiled back at her. "It was no bother. I enjoyed talking to you. Come around any time."

Katherine had no idea how to break the news to Stephen. After today's interviews, she knew she couldn't join him in Chicago. She had made a commitment to finish the judge's assignment. She knew that Stephen would not understand. In his mind, volunteer work held little value in the real world. It was a generous and sentimental thing to do in your spare time, but if something better came along, then someone else could fill in. After all, if the work wasn't important enough to pay someone for, then why worry about it?

Since much of Katherine's adult life had been spent doing just this kind of work, she was offended by his attitude, but it was simply another thing she had accepted long ago. Her value to him was her ability to nurture his children and provide a beautiful backdrop for his career. Their discussions together centered on family topics and the general themes of art, music and local gossip. Katherine sometimes wished he would ask her opinion about business matters or world headlines. She wished he would ask her if she was happy. Instead, they shared superficial conversations and he admired himself for

having chosen such a perfect woman to support him in his life.

Sometimes Katherine tired of being his perfect choice. But tonight, she just needed to find a way to break the news to Stephen that she wouldn't be joining him in Chicago after all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Katherine decided to call Stephen right away. She didn't want him to make any more specific plans that she would need to cancel. She took a deep breath and practiced her chirpiest voice before dialing the phone. "Hi, Stephen. Did I catch you in the middle of anything?"

Stephen had been in the middle of a conference with his accountant when he took Katherine's call. "Actually I am a little busy. What's up?"

Katherine decided against breaking the news over the phone. "I won't keep you. I just need to know what time you'll be home for dinner. I'm planning something that requires perfect timing. Can I aim for 7:00?"

Stephen smiled at Katherine's precise household skills. "Sure. Seven sounds fine. I don't have anything that should hold me here tonight. See you then."

Katherine was not pleased with her sudden cowardice, but she resolved to break the news him tonight, right after she fed him. Now she had to plan a special meal. Maybe poached salmon. Maybe prime rib. Maybe fried chicken and mashed potatoes. That was it. She would soften his response with thick chicken gravy. She smiled at her plan to manipulate his mood. Katherine remembered her mother's counsel about men's hearts being tied to their stomachs. She never fully believed it, but sometimes it seemed to work. She would get him to understand that she had given her word to the judge and she felt responsible for her decision. Stephen would not understand her choice, but gravy might help soften the blow.

Amy was the youngest of Katherine's three daughters. The oldest, Sarah, was an intern in a Los Angeles hospital and Christine was teaching third graders in Kansas City. Christine was engaged to a lawyer and they planned to be married next year. Amy continued to have trouble with her studies and had changed majors three times since starting college two years ago. Katherine was planning for Amy's trip to Spain this summer. She thought the opportunity to travel abroad as a student might make Amy take

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"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought I already told you. Jessica Cooper is planning to go, so I'll room with her." Amy was the youngest of Katherine's three daughters. The oldest, Sarah, was an intern in a Los Angeles hospital and Christine was teaching third graders in Kansas City. Christine was engaged to a lawyer and they planned to be married next year. Amy continued to have trouble with her studies and had changed majors three times since starting college two years ago. Katherine had high hopes for Amy's trip to Spain this summer. She thought the opportunity to travel abroad as a student might make Amy take her classes more seriously when she returned. Katherine always enjoyed Amy's happy company, however, and looked forward to this afternoon's visit.

Katherine started coffee and waited for the sound of Amy's Mustang convertible in the driveway. Katherine had argued with Stephen about the fast little yellow car. She worried that it was too much for a college student, but she lost the battle. Amy was Stephen's favorite and his last chance to spoil a daughter, so they paid the outrageous insurance and smiled when she shifted gears leaving the house.

Amy was fifteen minutes late, as usual. She bounced into the kitchen and threw her red ski jacket over a chair. "Hi, Mom. The coffee smells great. I can't stay long, though. I need to cram to save my grade with this test. I hate mid-terms. Why do you think they put us through this crap?"

As with much of Amy's conversation, this question did not demand an answer. Amy liked to challenge the world just for existing.

Katherine answered her anyway. "I don't know, Amy, I think it has something to do with accountability. Professors need to prove to their bosses that students come to classes and learn something from them. A silly nuisance, really."

Katherine poured two large mugs of hot black coffee and nodded to Amy to follow her to the living room. She had lit the fireplace and looked forward to an hour with Amy. "So, do you still plan to take that trip to Spain this summer? We need to make travel arrangements if you do."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought I already told you. Jessica Cooper is planning to go, so I'll room with her. We can even get a Euro-pass and spend some time exploring. The requirements for class attendance are really low, so we'll be able to have some fun. I'll FAX the enrollment form to Dad at the office, so he can send the check next week. I'll talk to Jessica about travel plans to get over there."

"Dad will be delighted to know he can help."

Amy missed the sarcasm and smiled at Katherine. "How are things here? I feel like months go by and I never talk to you guys. Do you have any big trips planned or anything?"

"Well, we were going to San Francisco in April, but we had to cancel so Dad can work in Chicago. He invited me to join him there in an apartment he's leased, but I had to decline."

Amy looked puzzled. "Why would you do that? You love Chicago. All that's keeping you here is this house. Check me out, Mom. All your children are basically grown."

"Actually - (youngest daughter and the last living reason I had to wake up in the morning) - I have some new responsibilities here in Winterborne. I have an assignment from Judge Matthews that I need to complete in three months."

"Huh? What kind of assignment? For Judge Matthews? Are you a parole officer or something?"

Katherine laughed at the thought of Helen on parole. "No. Nothing like that. The Women's League has received training to help the court investigate people who may need guardians. The judge wants some impartial input before he makes his decision, so we go and talk to people and report what we find."

"Wow! My mom a P.I. Do you get to bug rooms and carry a gun?"

"Oh, stop it. You know I wouldn't do anything like that. I just ask questions and form opinions."

"Yeah. Like Mike Hammer."

Katherine took a deep drink of her coffee and placed it on the table between them. "You can joke if you want to, but what I'm doing is very serious. A woman's existence is at stake. Helen will either continue to make her own decisions or her niece will own her life."

Amy looked at her mother's face and realized the subject was not a casual one for her. "Do you mean you've found out something weird about her? Should her niece be her guardian?"

"Oh my, no. I haven't got that far yet. But there are things about Helen that bother me. That's one reason I'm saying no to Stephen about his Chicago offer. I feel obligated to stick with my assignment. I would feel terrible if I gave my first case to someone else and they messed it up or didn't ask the questions I might ask. It may seem silly, but I am curious about this woman. I've heard good and bad things about who she is and what she's capable of, so I want to finish what I started. Do you think Dad will understand?"

"Dad? Sure. He's always been a soft touch. Just smile when you tell him and let him know how much you really wanted to go with him."

"O.K. I'll smile and explain and apologize. It always works for you."

"Right, Mom. Sorry I can't stay around to watch and coach, but I really have to get back to school and study. Before you tell Dad, make sure you say 'Hi' to him for me. I like my greeting to be delivered when he's in a good mood." Amy finished her coffee and carried both empty mugs back to the kitchen to rinse them.

After talking for just a few minutes, the two women hugged and Amy put her coat on as she hurried out the back door. Katherine sighed and returned to the kitchen to prepare the dinner feast and plan how she would break the news to Stephen. She grimaced and moaned as she poured the heavy oil onto the surface of the deep cast iron frying pan. She knew her kitchen would smell like grease for days.

Neal watched Helen walk into the foyer after her last walk of the day. She paused just inside the door. She was breathing heavily and her cane sagged against her side as she prepared to move on. Neal didn't want to startle her, so he made a little noise with his keys as he approached her. "Hi, Queen E. You look a little tired today. Were they picking on you at that greasy spoon where you hang out? Just tell me who they were and I'll go defend your honor. It'll take just a minute or two for me to gather my armor."

Helen smiled broadly and raised her cane in a mock attack. "I can take care of myself, thank you. Who are you to protect my honor? It must be hard enough for you to protect your own. Rescued any maidens in distress lately? Like that blonde who's so interested in my life?"

"Why, Helen, why would I need to rescue her? She seems able to handle herself. Just like you."

"Well, I only know that she seems suddenly interested in following me around. You may need to protect her from me."

Helen regained her composure and moved forward again. She passed Neal without saying anything else. Neal waited where he was until she turned the corner. He wondered what people had been saying to Katherine about her. He felt a sudden sadness. He would miss Helen when she left.

When Helen arrived inside her apartment, she began her evening rituals. She placed the two slices of bread from her pocket on the kitchen counter and slowly removed her overcoat. She hung the coat in the small entry closet and took off the beret. She placed the wool hat on the closet shelf and closed the sliding door. She walked to the wicker chair in the corner of the living room and eased onto the soft floral cushion it held. She gazed out of the curtainless window onto the well-lit courtyard. She sat like this for about a half hour and moved to the writing desk. She sat on the straight desk chair and

opened the center drawer of the desk. She took out a sheet of linen stationary and an old ball point pen. She began her daily correspondence to Meredith.

Dear Meredith,

I hope today went well for you and the baby. These long winter days can seem grey and tiresome, but spring is about to burst upon us. When I passed that ancient Oak at the corner of Walnut and Main, I spotted the smallest hint of green shooting up beside its twisted root. That root line crawls along the sidewalk and has caused it to buckle in several places, but it is home to the prettiest patch of early spring violets in the area. Soon you will be able to put Emily in her stroller and spend hours watching the world change before your eyes. Emily will be so surprised by the changes. Let her touch things and smell

things and stop to listen for
quiet sounds. You do the same.
Explore your world together
and give her confidence to ask
the next question. My students
always learned more by their
questions than their answers.

Well, enough of my
preaching for today. Thank
you for the recent pictures. It's
wonderful to watch Emily grow.
I know Alpha would be very
proud of both of you. Did you
get your check this month?
Please remember to buy Emily
another book of poems. If you
read them to her now she will
understand their rhythms and
harmony, even if she has yet to
grasp the words. Please say
hello to Jeff and I hope his new
job is going well.

As always, you have my love
and thoughts.

Helen

brown crunchy leg. He smiled broadly as he bit into the hot juicy skin. "I won't ask until
after w Helen folded the letter and placed it in a stamped envelope. She carefully
addressed the envelope and propped it on the desk. She would mail it on her way out in
the morning, as she did every day. She walked back to the kitchen and filled the teakettle
with water. While it was heating, she put the bread in the toaster and got out butter and
jam from the refrigerator. She methodically prepared her tea and toast and carried it back
to the wicker chair. She placed the food and drink on the small table beside the chair and
again sat down to gaze out at the courtyard. She ate slowly in the silence of the fall and
Wisconsin winter night.

Katherine decided to make her move before clearing the table. Stephen had
pushed back his chair and poured himself a cup of black coffee. She was direct with her
news. Stephen could hardly believe his nose. The kitchen smelled like a summer
evening from his youth. Was that fried chicken? *Fried?* Katherine had not fried
anything in years. She fought the cholesterol wars with vigor and consistency. He
inhaled and stopped wondering about her motives. Whatever brought this about was
O.K. with him. He suddenly felt nostalgic and flooded with memories of his boyhood.
He wondered if the Dairy Queen across town was open all winter. He might need a hot
fudge sundae later.

Katherine called to him from the dining room. "I made each of us a screwdriver
and put them in the refrigerator. I'm finishing in here if you want to get them out for us."

Stephen retrieved the two chilled stemmed glasses and took them into the dining
room. Katherine had already set out all the food for dinner, family style, just for the two
of them. "So, what do you think of my surprise? I had to change clothes after I fried the
chicken. I couldn't believe how the grease saturated everything. It's hard to imagine
eating this way often. But tonight you can stuff yourself without guilt. I'll say nothing
about your arteries."

Stephen laughed and reached across the linen tablecloth to capture a golden

brown crunchy leg. He smiled broadly as he bit into the hot juicy skin. "I won't ask until after we eat, but I know I'm being set up for something."

Katherine laughed and handed him the bowl of steaming mashed potatoes. "By the time I break it to you, you'll be too stuffed to care."

They proceeded through the meal without any serious conversation. Stephen talked about the new streetlights being put in near the high school and Katherine talked about her overdue books at the library. Katherine didn't actually eat any of the chicken skin, but dug through it to some white meat below. Stephen ate very little broccoli and had two servings of potatoes with extra gravy.

Katherine decided to make her move before clearing the table. Stephen had pushed back his chair and poured himself a cup of black coffee. She was direct with her news. "I can't go with you to Chicago."

Stephen sat upright and put down his cup. "Excuse me? Did I just hear you turn down an opportunity to explore Chicago with me? You always said that was a dream of yours, to have time and money to do it right, hit all the high spots and see everything there was to see. I'm giving you that and you're saying no?"

Katherine had expected this reaction. "Any other time would have been wonderful. But I just started this court assignment and it's my first one. People are counting on me. I can't just turn around and dump it back in their laps so I can go play."

"But you did just start. That's the point. You haven't invested so much that someone else can't take over. You know Judge Matthews from the club and church. He'll understand if you tell him the situation. Do you want me to cover it with him for you? I could call him right now."

"No, I don't. I've made up my mind about this. I have a right to set my own priorities in life and I've chosen to meet my obligation. If you can't understand that, it's your problem." Katherine got up from the table and left the dirty dishes behind. She went upstairs to the bathroom and started water for a long, hot bath.

Stephen also rose from the table. He walked back through the kitchen and grabbed his briefcase as he headed for the back door. He called upstairs to Katherine. "I'm going back to the office for a few hours. Thanks for the food. It was a nice surprise for awhile."

Katherine had clear memories of these weekend preparation conversations when Stephen was away last time. Although she dreaded the loneliness of the nights ahead, she also found that Katherine and Stephen avoided one another all weekend. They found chores and errands and phone calls to keep themselves consciously busy and consciously apart. They smiled through dinner on Saturday night at Phil and Molly's. They greeted friends at church and they were their usual poised selves at the Club Brunch. Stephen spent Sunday afternoon at the office, preparing for his Chicago trip on Monday. Katherine met Amy at the Mall in Madison, where they laughed and shopped and gossiped. By Sunday evening, the couple became comfortable with their practiced distance and had a quiet supper in the kitchen.

Stephen helped clear the table and was heading for his study when he turned to Katherine and commented lightly. "I've arranged for an apartment in Chicago. I can move in on Wednesday, but I'm leaving in the morning as planned. I'll be at the Palmer House if you need me. I can pack a few things in the morning and get the rest of my clothes next weekend. Do you know if my navy pinstripe is still at the cleaners?"

"Ah, let me think. I remember now. It should be done on Tuesday. Does it matter?"

"No, I was just planning what to take. I'm sure I can find something else."

"You may need to replace your black loafers while you are in Chicago. I noticed they are starting to look a little worn. Maybe you could get to one of the stores on Michigan Avenue while you are there. You'll have some spare time on your hands. Did I tell you about the new novel Molly read last month? It sounded like something you might enjoy. I'll get a copy this week and send it with you next Sunday."

"That sounds good. Thanks for the suggestion, although I don't know how much time I'll have if I really get down to business. I had planned to catch up on some back issues of *Business Week* and I've fallen behind in some other reading. I'll grab some things from the study tonight and see how it goes."

Katherine had clear memories of these weekend preparation conversations when Stephen was away last time. Although she dreaded the loneliness of the nights ahead, she also felt satisfied with her decision to remain behind. She only wished Stephen had understood that decision.

Stephen was gone before Katherine woke up Monday morning. He left a note on the kitchen table with the address and phone number for his apartment. Katherine pinned it on the bulletin board, right next to the pizza coupons. Then, she opened the morning paper and poured herself a cup of coffee. She paused as she drank the first sip and suddenly remembered her scheduled meeting with Neal. She put down the paper and hurried upstairs to get dressed. It was only 8:15. She still had time to get there as promised.

Neal watched Katherine grab her bag from the car and hurry towards the building. It was exactly 9:00 and he could tell by her rushed pace that she liked to be punctual. He opened the lobby door as she approached. "Whoa, there's no penalty for lateness here. You can slow down any time."

"I'm sorry. I had so much going on this weekend that I nearly forgot our appointment. Is your special brew ready? I've only had one cup yet this morning and I need to catch up."

"It's fresh and hot and waiting right down the hall, where we were the other day. I took the liberty of adding pastries to the menu. Lawson's Bakery had some fine-looking choices this morning."

"Thanks, but I didn't mean for you to go to any extra effort for me."

"No problem. I stop there every morning and say hi to Roger anyway. He has one of the last real bakeries in the state and I like to encourage him when I can. Nice guy."

They settled in at the game table and munched on cheese Danish for a few minutes before beginning the interview. Katherine licked a dab of frosting from her lip

CHAPTER FIVE

as she asked her first question. "Do you know if Helen has a history of reckless behavior? Has she been injured or had any close calls? Are people trying to keep her from

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Thank you, Katherine. Do you know how much conjecture I deal with every day? The "what-ifs" and "do you suppose" questions begin to wear on me after awhile."

Katherine had never heard him say anything serious or reflective before. It added to her curiosity about him. So, was she his only incident?

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They settled in at the game table and munched on cheese Danish for a few minutes before beginning the interview. Katherine licked a dab of frosting from her lip as she asked her first question. "Do you know if Helen has a history of reckless behavior? Has she been injured or had any close calls? Are people trying to keep her from repeating mistakes she made before?"

Neal smiled at her inquiry. "I like how you think. You're asking a different question. You don't ask why someone would behave that way, considering the risk of falling. You ask if she's fallen."

Katherine paused to consider that comment. "Why is that so unusual? Shouldn't I try to stick to the facts, instead of conjecture?"

"Thank you, Katherine. Do you know how much conjecture I deal with every day? The 'what-ifs' and 'do you suppose' questions begin to wear on me after awhile."

Katherine had never heard him say anything serious or reflective before. It added to her curiosity about him. "So, has she had any incidents?"

"I can honestly say that I know of no event where she has fallen during one of her walks or had any personal injury related to her excursions. Is that official enough to document for the record?" He smiled broadly and poured each of them another cup of coffee.

"So, why is the threat of injury so woven through people's descriptions of her behavior?"

"Bingo. You have discovered an important piece of the puzzle already, that 'threat of injury' they all seem to focus on. I see it as a sort of universal paranoia afflicting the protected majority who live here. No one else in the building walks

anywhere. They have family members run errands for them or they carpool or they use the local senior service agency to tend to their daily needs. Helen's independence is a constant challenge to their worldview. They must predict injury to someone who defies their unwritten codes of behavior. To them, Helen will meet a terrible violent end if she continues her rash behavior."

Katherine suddenly sat upright as she asked, "You make this whole thing sound like some sort of organized conspiracy. Isn't that a little far-fetched?"

"Organized? Hardly. It's just the way they see their world. Individually, I don't know a bad person living in this place. I talk to all of them and I like each person. But, together, they're another story. Helen doesn't fit in and that's not good for Helen."

"You still make it sound organized. Even is she's different, why would such nice people want to hurt Helen?"

"Oh, I don't have any single answer to that one. I guess finding out why must be part of your job here. Besides, no one actually wants to hurt Helen exactly. They believe they know what's best for her and it's all for her own good. Helen just doesn't get it and that's what makes them think she's crazy."

After some more conversation about how normal people act at the Smiling Seniors Apartments, Neal started to clean up the dishes and Katherine understood her interview had probably ended. She wasn't satisfied that he had told her everything, but she wasn't going to push him today. She would consider his conspiracy theory as she reached her own conclusions. He was a friend of Helen's, after all, so she would take his comments with the usual grain of salt.

"If you don't mind, Neal, could we have just one more cup of coffee? I'm curious about something that has nothing to do with Helen's situation."

"Really? What is it? Why do you think I can help?"

"Because my question is about you."

Neal smiled at her and poured them both another cup of coffee. "Well, I hope I

know the answer. Sometimes I'm not the best authority on the subject of myself."

Katherine was surprised at her unusually forthright request. "It's just that you seem a little out of place here. I mean, you are educated and talented and I'm sure you could find a well-paying position with another manufacturing company. Why are you working at the Smiling Seniors? Do you have a family member living here? Are you looking after a relative?"

Neal laughed. "No. None of these fine people can claim me as kin. I guess you could say I've taken a brief sabbatical from life. I needed some time to breathe deeply, look around and get my bearings. The Harrison plant closing and some other things took their toll on me. I don't know how else to explain it, except that this job is a welcome refuge for awhile. Is that the answer you needed?"

Katherine had watched his face as he spoke. His mind seemed to be picturing things she didn't understand. "It just gives me more questions. But I'll leave it at that for today. I know a lot of people were affected when the Harrison Company left town, but I thought most of them found new work."

Neal's smile seemed forced this time. "There are so many stories about so many people I know. Some in management followed the plant to Mexico. Most people didn't want to do that, though. The floor workers didn't have the option. I still see lots of them around town. So much damage. I was lucky. I had a good severance package that I invested. It seems to be growing nicely for me."

"But why this job? You even have an apartment here, don't you?"

"Oh, this has been one of my luckiest breaks. I can live here and keep busy every day doing work that benefits the residents. I'm useful and productive and I get a lot of time to think and plan what to do next. I like being around people all day and I like escaping into my apartment whenever I need some time alone. I still have friends from Harrison who go fishing with me and I travel a little when I can. Yeah, this job is perfect for me right now."

Katherine was intrigued by this serious side of Neal. He had seemed so light and funny when she had first encountered him. "Thanks for the short explanation. I'm sure there's more to it, but I won't turn this into an interrogation."

"It didn't feel like an interrogation at all. In fact, I'm surprised I said so much to you. I don't talk like that very often, but it just rolled right out of me. You're pretty good."

Katherine blushed again. She suddenly felt awkward and anxious to leave. She stood up and began to gather her things. She looked at her watch said, "Oh, look at the time. I promised myself that I would visit with Helen today and the morning is nearly gone."

Neal laughed his natural contagious laugh again as he helped Katherine with her coat. "Wait a minute, slow down. You're doing just fine. Did you forget that Helen never gets back to her place before 11:00 anyway? You have plenty of time to regroup and plan your meeting with her."

Katherine slid her hand down the smooth lining of her coat sleeve as Neal held it for her. She realized she liked how he smelled. She couldn't place the aroma, but she took a deep breath to try to capture more of it. "Thanks again for all your help. I'll think about what you told me. Maybe I can ask some more questions of her neighbors. Some different questions. I'll listen to their answers and add your theory to what I hear."

"Don't give me more credit in this than I deserve. Your questions were leading you to the same place eventually. It just would have taken you longer." He let the coat fall gently over her shoulders.

Helen saw Katherine's car in the parking lot as she returned to the apartment building. She knew she would need to talk to this blonde eventually, so today seemed as good as any. Helen remembered Ann's threat. Brother Randolph's daughter liked to take

charge of family business and now Ann was going to take Helen to court if she didn't "behave herself and act normal." Helen had laughed at Ann's arrogance at the time, but here was this woman, following her and wanting to ask her questions. Helen took a deep breath and moved slowly toward the building.

Katherine stood up from the lime plastic sofa and put out her hand to Helen as she entered the lobby. Helen raised her hand to Katherine and allowed her to shake it. The women shared a moment of awkward silence before Katherine spoke. "Hello, Helen, I said I would be back to visit with you and I hope today is a good time to do that."

Helen chuckled. "I don't think there will ever be a good day to discuss your business with me. But we need to get this done sometime. Where do you want to have this little talk?"

"Well, I've been using the game room for my interviews. Is that O.K. with you?"

"Sure, just give me a few minutes to get there. You can go on ahead and I'll catch up."

Katherine took the hint and started down the hall. She felt herself breathing rapidly, as though the thought of this conversation made her nervous. She wondered what she expected from Helen, that she should have such a reaction. The thought of feeling intimidated by a 93-year old woman made Katherine smile and the smile helped her relax.

When Helen entered the small room about five minutes later, Katherine was surprised by her gentle appearance. Her skin seemed almost transparent and her short grey hair was scattered randomly around the dark wool beret. Katherine could hear the rhythm of Helen's breathing as she crossed the room to sit in the chair opposite her at the wooden game table. Helen looked up and her deep blue eyes paused as though they were taking some measurement of Katherine. She placed her cane lightly on the table between

them and stroked it with the gnarled fingers of her left hand. Katherine noticed that her nails were clean and cut short. Small blue veins rippled as Helen made even circular patterns on the fine old wood.

Helen spoke first. She inhaled and exhaled as though preparing for an athletic event and raised her chin before starting. Her voice was quiet and direct. "I understand you have some questions for me, Katherine. Shall we begin?"

Katherine was as unnerved by this stately presence as she had been by Helen's earlier confrontational manner. She completely lost track of her planned interview question and simply responded to Helen. "Alright. First, I would like to know if you are happy living here."

Katherine had no idea where that question came from, since she had not thought of it before. Helen's happiness was not the issue, after all. Her sanity and competence were. Because they weren't following the plan she had made for their first official conversation, Katherine suddenly felt like an observer instead of a participant in the interview. She wondered what her next question would be and if it would also surprise her.

Helen smiled. It was a wave that contracted and rippled through the certified wrinkles on her aged face. "Happy? What an interesting thing to ask me. It's been so long since anyone mentioned my happiness. I'll need a minute to think about it. Am I happy?"

"I won't rush you. Please take all the time you need with my questions. I'll be taking notes, though, if that's all right with you."

"Notes? Of course. I expected that. In fact, after all my years in a classroom, I would be disappointed if you didn't."

Katherine liked the tone in Helen's voice. It was confident and secure.

"Thank you. I won't let my notes get in the way of my listening. You were a teacher for many years, but I was an excellent student."

They both smiled at her statement.

Helen continued. "I would say that I am not happy. I am resigned to my life. At my age, I think that is quite common. I cannot control certain things about my daily existence as I once did. I mean that in a metaphysical sense as well as a physical one. My dreams have less merit. So, I walk. I observe. I rave at the world and delight in it. Simple enough, don't you think, Katherine?"

Katherine had stopped taking notes. She listened to Helen's words and gained a new respect for the active mind alive under that wild hair. She felt her mouth go dry as she spoke. "Why, ah, yes Ma'am. It seems very simple when you put it that way. Have you said these things to Ann?"

Helen laughed aloud. It was the same boisterous, animated laugh that frightened people in the halls. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's just so funny every time I think of explaining anything at all to Ann. You see, I'm the great deserter of the family in her eyes. I didn't honor the Grant name by returning to Winterborne after I received my education. She says I could have become a fine professor of English in Madison, without snubbing the locals. No, even if I said these things to Ann, (and I've used similar phrases), she wouldn't hear what I said. Ann interprets all my words as the ramblings of a crazy old woman. I understand why the other tenants think that of me. My life has been so different from any of theirs, but Ann has been a serious disappointment to me over the years. Even before I moved back to care for Alpha."

Katherine forgot she was interviewing a suspected lunatic. Helen suddenly took on the attributes of a real person. "Did Alpha ask you to come to Winterborne when she knew she was dying? Were you close to her?"

"Alpha was always the heart of the family. She respected and forgave all of us our shortcomings. Alpha had a happy marriage for thirty-five years, until Henry died of a heart attack. We had kept in touch, but it was her daughter, Cora, who called me when Alpha was diagnosed with the cancer. Cora was living in Chicago and had built a good

business career there. She knew she could not take the time necessary to care for her mother, so she contacted me. I gave up my apartment and moved back to Winterborne. I was happy to be there for Alpha and I'm still glad I made that decision."

"But why didn't you go back east after Alpha died?"

"Just think for a moment, Katherine. I was nearly eighty-five years old by then. Most of my friends and connections in Boston and New York were dead. Who would I go back to? It seemed to make as much sense to live among strangers here as there."

Katherine took a deep breath and presented her next question, which she thought might bring out the angry Helen again. "So, why haven't you tried to make friends with the locals? Some of them seem nice enough."

Helen laughed even louder than before. "Didn't you know? Someone must have told you what a horrible snob I am. I think I'm too good for them."

Katherine had not expected this answer. Indeed it echoed the comments she had heard from Helen's neighbors. "Do you think you are too good for them?"

"Some of them. I'll admit it. What would we have in common? I've never thrived on gossip and for many of my neighbors, it's their daily bread. But there are others. I could like spending time with Mary Yoder. She seems decent and experienced in life. But she has to live in this village. If we started having coffee together, there could be trouble for her."

"I'm not sure I understand why. Mary seems pretty independent and respected."

"Oh, you haven't heard the other part of my nasty reputation, then? They think I'm 'not natural' in my female yearnings. They think I'm looking for a girlfriend, in the Biblical sense."

Katherine dropped her pen. As she retrieved it from the floor, she looked up at Helen and saw her smiling down at her. "Is it true?"

"Would it matter?"

"Of course not. I mean, it's none of my business, is it?"

"Not really. Thank you for noticing. I think I need to go back to my apartment now. They have probably delivered my lunch and I would hate for the food to get much colder than it already is. I enjoyed our talk. Could we meet again and continue my interesting biography?"

"Of course, anytime. I look forward to it."

Helen made her way out the door and paused in the hall. Katherine could no longer see her, but she suddenly heard a loud shout. "Clear the halls! I'm back in the building and I'm hungry. I hope my lunch is ready!"

Helen chuckled to herself as she walked down the vacant corridor to her apartment.

Katherine sat at the game table and tried to comprehend what she had just heard.

"Well, sanity is a relative term, you know. We all have our moments. I would

Katherine walked down the hall in the opposite direction from Helen's apartment until she came to Neal's number on the door. She knocked gently, assuming he was somewhere else at this time of day. He opened the door and seemed utterly surprised to see Katherine standing there. She looked shaken. He invited her in.

Katherine looked up at him with an expression of bewilderment and confusion. He offered a seat on his long, well-made dark brown sofa. Katherine made a mental note of the quality of the decor, considering the address of the apartment. Here was a man who smelled good and had some taste in furniture. This certainly had developed into an interesting day.

"Katherine, are you O.K.? You look disoriented."

"I just spoke with Queen E. You were right. She has been doomed to a wilderness she didn't design. How often have you talked to her about her life?"

"Me? Never, really. I just put pieces together and drew my own conclusions. What did she say to you? Can I get you something to drink? Juice, Pepsi, beer,

whiskey?"

Katherine smiled and asked him for a glass of water. While he went to the kitchen to get it, Katherine looked more closely at his living room. The opposite wall was lined with ceiling-high bookcases, each shelf completely filled with hardcover editions. She spotted fiction she recognized, as well as some obscure biographies and technical books. He even had an entire section of poetry. The bookcases themselves were a luxurious cherry.

Before she could explore further, Neal returned and handed her a tall glass of ice water. "So, what did Helen say that made you so uncomfortable?"

"She was so sane. I expected rambling, like she does with the people in the halls. I expected some disconnection from reality, some indication that she really needed a guardian. I know I only saw her for a half hour or so, but she seemed so sane."

"Well, sanity is a relative term, you know. We all have our moments. I would hate to be judged by my behavior and language at the bowling alley on some nights."

"Bowling alley?"

"Sure. I've been on the Harrison team for ten years now. Harrison may have left town, but the bowling team remains intact. We still even use the Harrison Company name on our shirts. Loyalty is a strange thing."

"Yes, I guess it is." Katherine tried to imagine this man, who kept a row of poetry in his book collection, throwing a 20-pound ball down the local lanes.

Just as she resolved this image in her mind, she glanced into the small dining room at the back of the compact apartment. Instead of dining room furniture, the space had been made into an office. A drafting table stood against one wall and there was a computer workspace constructed in the corner. The computer was on and Katherine could see the screen from where she sat. She recognized the Web Site. Stephen used it all the time. It carried the current stock market numbers.

"You follow the market?"

"Oh, you noticed my friend in the corner. I sneak in here two or three times a day to track my investments. I don't gamble the whole package, but I like to speculate a little. I've done pretty well, considering I have no real plan of action. Mostly, I follow my intuition and rely on luck. So far, I've been pleased with the results. It gives me something else to think about while I'm doing routine maintenance on the boiler or shoveling the walks."

"You seem to have a very busy life. What do you do in your spare time?"

Neal chuckled at her observation. "Actually, I'm into real estate. I have several rental properties and I like to drive around town looking for new acquisitions. I talk to people and listen and wait until I like the price for something I've spotted. I think of it as a long-term hobby. I suppose it's another reason I didn't want to leave with Harrison."

"So, if you like real estate so much, why didn't you find a place for yourself?"

"You really are good. Actually, I did own a rather nice house in Pinewood Estates. I had made a lot of improvements over the years and it suited me very well. But someone came to town and spotted it. Mr. Anderson walked right up to the door and offered me a number I couldn't resist. It was about the same time I lost my job, so I decided to go liquid with that asset. I sort of added the profit to my severance package. But, that's enough about me. What are you going to do next?"

"If you mean within the next few hours, I'm going home to write down my impressions from this morning. I haven't been able to digest what Helen said and how she said it. If I write it down and go back to it later, maybe I can organize it a little better in my brain."

"Sounds pretty efficient to me. Can I get you more water?"

"Oh, no. I'll let you get back to your work, whatever that is. Thank you for your time. I'm not sure why I came to you, but I do feel better. I'll be talking to you again, soon, I hope." Katherine rose to leave and suddenly realized that she had been sitting there in her coat, with her leather bag on her lap. She was embarrassed at her absent-

mindful behavior. Neal, however, had not seemed to notice. He let her do whatever she felt most comfortable doing, including sitting in his living room as though it was an unheated shed.

"I hope to see you soon and often. Good-bye, Katherine." Neal opened the door and allowed her to gracefully exit without commenting on her nervous behavior.

Katherine needed more than an afternoon to pull her thoughts together. In fact, she gathered all the notes she had taken over the past two weeks and wrote a preliminary report. The judge had not requested that she do this so soon, but she wanted to see what she had so far. She spent two weeks writing and revising and thinking about her observations. During this time, she also talked about her progress with Molly and Amy. Since she also hoped to be a court advocate, Molly was curious about the investigation from a professional standpoint, as well as that of a close friend. Amy listened to the story, but she was so involved in her schoolwork and social life that very little of what her mother said sunk in.

Stephen came home on Friday nights and they re-established their practiced routines of weekend errands, dinners with friends and absent-minded chatter about local events. Stephen spent Saturday and Sunday afternoons at his office and left for Chicago Monday mornings. By early March, they seemed to have forgotten that Katherine had foiled Stephen's plans for their spring. They were comfortable again being the parents of three wonderful daughters, warm hosts to their frequent guests and pillars of Winterborne. These warm rituals worked beautifully, except for Monday mornings at about 8:15, when Katherine pulled her unfinished report from the middle desk drawer and Stephen sat waiting in line at the Tri-State tollbooth. At these moments, for reasons unclear to either of them, they each sighed and felt close to tears.

The last week of March brought one of the biggest snowstorms of the season. The flakes were huge white reminders that spring had not taken hold yet. On this quiet Tuesday morning, Katherine stood in her living room, holding a cup of steaming hot chocolate and admiring the beauty of the rolling drifts in the yard. The phone interrupted her reverie and a frantic voice got her full attention. It was Ann Carter. She was talking rapidly and Katherine had some trouble understanding all the words as they came tumbling out.

"It's Helen. She's out there. Leslie Logan from the Smiling Seniors just called and they don't know where she is. No one saw her leave, but they knocked on her door and there was no answer. Some neighbors got Leslie to go into Helen's apartment and she was gone. Have you seen the snow out there? She could be buried in some drift or something. You need to come over right away. I want you to see in person how crazy she is. Can you meet me at Leslie's office in half an hour?"

"Of course. I'll throw on a coat and be right there."

Leslie and Ann were in the middle of a serious discussion when Katherine entered the office. They stopped talking when Katherine arrived and Leslie moved quickly to close the office door. Ann was still agitated and her voice became shrill with emotion. "What are we going to do now? Can we call the police and ask them to search for her?" Leslie was already moving toward the phone. Katherine broke in with a question. "Has anyone called the Black Forest to see if she made it to breakfast?"

"In this weather? She can't have gone four blocks, much less all the way downtown." Ann was obviously annoyed by Katherine's naiveté.

"But won't the police ask where we've looked or what her habits are?" Leslie stopped short of the phone. "She's right about that, Ann. I agree that Helen

could not possibly have walked to town today, but it may be worth a call."

Katherine was leafing through the phone book to find the number for the cafe. "225-3472. Ask for Sheila."

Ann glared at both Leslie and Katherine as they placed the call. "I still think it's a waste of time."

"Hello, this is Leslie Logan at the Smiling Senior Apartments. Is Sheila available? Thank-you."

Katherine looked out the office window and saw Neal mounting his tractor as the snow fell into large heaps on the parking lot. He had a broad smile on his face as he started the noisy engine. The plow blade made a scraping noise on the pavement as he began pushing snow toward the curb.

"Sheila? This is Leslie Logan. I have a problem you may be able to help me with. We aren't sure where Helen Grant is this morning. She's not in her apartment and with all this snow, we know she couldn't walk to the cafe."

Sheila looked around the cafe and waved at Helen, who was sitting in her window perch, sipping on her second cup of coffee. "Has anyone there talked to Neal about this?"

Leslie paused as she realized that no one had mentioned it to him. He had been busy with snow removal since dawn and nobody thought to go outside and ask. "Ah, no. What does Neal have to do with it?"

Sheila turned her back to the customers, so they would not hear the conversation. "Neal dropped her off about an hour and a half ago. He said he was on his way to the bakery anyway and he gave Helen a lift. He even said he would be back for her after he plowed the parking lot. Did he do something wrong?"

"Well, other than break regulations about transporting residents while on the job, I guess it's O.K. Thanks for your help, Sheila. At least we can stop worrying now."

Katherine turned away from the window as Leslie's conversation with Sheila ended. "I heard you say something about Neal. How is he involved?"

"Apparently, Neal took Helen downtown this morning and she's eating at her usual spot. Funny how he didn't bother to mention it to anybody." Leslie frowned at Ann, who was more than willing to frown back in agreement.

"I never have trusted that man. I always feel like he's up to something." Ann was about to develop a conspiracy theory.

Katherine interceded. "I don't think he was 'up to' anything. I believe he was doing an old woman a favor during a snow storm."

"But he knew it was against policy. Technically, I could fire him for this, you know. Our insurance carrier would not approve of his behavior. He's a bonded employee, but there are certain limits."

"Oh, I see. Well I guess you could go fire him now, but he's only half done with the plowing. You probably need him the rest of the day."

Katherine's sarcasm was not lost on Ann or Leslie. Leslie responded with a small, hurried laugh. "No, of course I won't fire him for this. I only said I *could* if I wanted to. Most of the time he's very trustworthy. The tenants seem to like him and he's been more dependable than other men we've had in that job. I only wish he would have mentioned what he did before it caused so many problems."

Ann was not so forgiving. "Well, I still think I shall mention this incident to Brad Mueller sometime. He is still on your Board of Directors, isn't he Leslie?"

"Why, yes he is. But, this will be noted in my monthly report. The whole board will know that I issued a warning to Neal about transporting tenants. But if you want to talk to Brad yourself, I can't stop you."

Katherine perked up at the mention of an official reprimand for Neal's generosity. "Did I hear you say that you are 'warning' Neal about his conduct?"

"Of course. There's a form he signs to acknowledge his action and it becomes part of his employee file. If he gets three warnings in a year, I can terminate him with cause. It's standard procedure. He knows about it. Do you have a problem with it?"

Katherine sighed. "No, I guess I just haven't been out in a workplace in so many years that I forgot about all the fine print. Is there some regulation that says I can't go to the cafe and bring her home?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe you should call the judge."

Katherine retrieved her coat from the chair where she'd placed it and headed for the door. She put out her hand to Ann to say good-bye before she left. "I'm sorry that you had to get so excited for this false alarm. I know how much you worry over Helen. I'll call you later this week. We can meet for lunch at the club, if you'd like."

Ann pulled together a polite smile and shook Katherine's hand. "Thank you. I would like that very much. I'm sure we can find many more things to discuss about this situation."

Before closing the door behind her, Katherine glanced back at Leslie. "Good-bye, Leslie. Try not to be too hard on Neal. I think his heart was in the right place. I'm just not sure there's a form on file to reflect that."

Katherine waved through the window to Helen before entering the Black Forest Cafe. Helen motioned to Katherine to join her at her window seat. Katherine spotted Sheila at the back of the room and mouthed a "Hello" to her as she sat down opposite Helen. Katherine paused before asking her next question. "But what about the gossip?"

Sheila came to the table and to take Katherine's order. "Hi again. Pretty lousy day to be out and about. What can I bring you?"

"I would love a big mug of hot chocolate. And cinnamon toast. Do you need anything else, Helen? Another cup of coffee?"

"Your hot chocolate sounds really good to me. What do you think, Sheila? Can I handle the change in my diet?"

"Sure, Helen. You may have started a new habit here. I'll be right back with your

mugs. The toast will take a couple minutes."

"Thanks, Sheila."

Katherine took her coat off and folded it over the back of the empty chair next to her. "Well, Helen, you caused quite a stir over at the Smiling Seniors this morning. Ann and Leslie called me at home. They thought you were lost in the storm."

Helen didn't laugh out loud this time. She smiled slightly and shook her head. "I guess they would have welcomed that. No need for a hearing if the crazy old woman lost herself in the snow. They could send out the dogs and deliver me directly to the asylum."

"I don't think Ann wants to put you in such a place. I think she just wants to believe that you are safe and cared for."

"Oh, it's that 'cared-for' part that scares me most. It's one of the reasons I never married any of those guys."

"What guys?"

Helen did laugh aloud this time. "Are you surprised I was courted? Why, yes. I had three different marriage proposals. I almost said yes once. I accepted the ring and wore it for nearly a year. Then, he started talking about taking care of me. I gave him back the ring and decided to continue to take care of myself. That summer I took care of myself on my first cross-country highway trip. I discovered the stars in the deep night sky of Arizona and didn't think about him at all."

Katherine paused before asking her next question. "But what about the gossip? Why would people think you liked women if you had a history with men?"

"Because that was the summer I met Beatrice. She was hired as a science teacher at the school where I had taught English for fifteen years. We bought a house together in Boston and she took care of the domestic chores. I paid for the taxes, utilities and property maintenance in exchange for her taking responsibility for the cooking and cleaning. She accumulated cash and I experienced daily freedom. It was a good arrangement for both of us."

"Oh, I see how that could have been interpreted."

Sheila came with the hot chocolate and the conversation turned to the beauty of the snow as it blew in small torrents against the frosted glass window.

Katherine returned the conversation to events of the day. "Well, like I was saying, they called me at home to help find you. Funny thing was, the answer was literally under their noses. We discovered that Neal brought you here. Did you know that it was against the rules for him to do that?"

Helen's blue eyes twinkled. "Of course I did. I read the tenant manual. But what's life about if you don't break an occasional rule?"

Katherine twinkled back as she bit into a corner of the warm cinnamon toast. "Just don't let Ann hear you say that."

They both laughed and watched more of the snowfall while Katherine finished eating. As they sipped the last of their hot chocolates, Katherine signaled to Sheila to bring her the check. "I guess you figured out that I'm here to take you home. Do you need to stop for anything on the way?"

Helen reached for her coat. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I would like to stop somewhere. It was kind of you to offer."

The two women walked slowly to Katherine's car as the snow painted their coats with a layer of fragile white webs. Katherine opened the doors and started the car with her remote control button. Helen laughed as she watched the Lexus come to life without a person inside. "I really miss my car. This is a very nice one. What model is it? Mine is a Ford. Very dependable."

"This is a Lexus and it's a dependable car for me, too. I don't drive as much as I'd like to, but I'm very comfortable in it." Katherine helped Helen get buckled in and then brushed powdered snow off the windows.

As she put the car in gear, she realized what Helen had last said. "Why did you say that your Ford 'is' a dependable car? Do you still have it?"

"Haven't you noticed it? It's parked in my space at the apartment building, way at the end, next to those snow heaps Neal likes to build."

"Really? But you don't drive, do you? Everybody says you walk everywhere."

Helen looked as sad as Katherine had ever seen her. "No, I haven't been able to drive it for about three years. My eyes are going, you know. I don't read like I used to either, but I pay rent for that parking space and the car is mine and I keep it there. I can see it out my window and it reminds me of all my road trips."

"But don't cars need to be driven? I mean, doesn't something happen to an engine if it isn't used?"

"Of course. Neal takes it out for me. He drives it to the country and back every couple of weeks and tells me how it's working. So far, the old Ford is aging beautifully. It's nice of him to do that for me, don't you think?"

"Why, yes I do. But is it against any regulations?"

"Who knows? We didn't ask."

Katherine pulled into the street and turned to Helen, "Where are we going? Do you need to stop by the market or drug store for something? You didn't tell me what you needed."

"I need to visit the old homestead, if you don't mind. Do you belong to the Country Club? I would like to go there, if you don't mind."

"Yes, I am a member, but I don't think there's much going on today. I can come by later and take you to dinner if you'd like. They have a pretty good menu and I'm sure you know some people there."

"No. The last thing I want is to run into those people. If we could just drive out there, I want to see my green."

"Your green? Which one is that? I've played the course lots of time, but I've never seen your name on any of the greens."

"Oh, it's just an inside joke I shared with my father. His father first thought of a

golf course out there and the ground has always been in my family. I'll explain my green when we get there."

Katherine drove the three miles to the club in silence and let Helen sightsee along the way. When they arrived at the entrance and pulled into the long drive, Helen finally spoke again. "Please go to the most northern part of the parking lot and find the most eastern location to stop the car. I'm not sure we can see it from there, but it will be close."

Katherine did as she was told and parked the car at an extreme edge of the large parking area. Helen's eyes were searching the horizon for a landmark. Then she spotted what she was searching for. "See that row of bare bushes high and to the right? Those are the lilac bushes my mother had planted when the course was designed. She loved lilacs and she wanted their fragrance to drift onto the sixth green during the first weeks of June. That's just what happened. It's so delightful that golfers pause there for no other reason than to absorb the beauty of those flowers before moving on."

"What a nice story. Did you play golf? You called it your green."

"My yes, I played lots of golf and I made the most important decision of my life on that sixth green. I was a terrific golfer – in fact I was good at most of the sports I tried. When I was sixteen my father told me it was time for me to decide my future. He took me golfing and we talked about my choices. He thought I should try to play golf professionally. Can you imagine? There were hardly any courses that allowed women to play at all and he thought I could make my living at it. I was tempted, believe me, but it seemed so impossible at the time."

"Your father sounds like a man ahead of his time."

"Oh, he was that and more. I wish I could have lived up to his dream for me. We got to the sixth hole and sat together near the blossoming lilac bushes. It was a private hideaway where we could talk. I guess you know that it's the most secluded green on the whole course with its gentle slope beyond the bushes and a grove of trees on the other

side. We sat there talking for the longest time and I finally made up my mind. I decided to go to school and pursue a career in teaching instead of sports. I was pretty logical for sixteen, don't you think?"

"Was it the right choice? Did you enjoy teaching?"

Helen shifted in her seat and looked out the side window toward the clubhouse.

"I enjoyed teaching very much, but I'm not sure it was the right choice. It was the safe choice. I don't think about it often because regret doesn't change anything, but I do wonder what might have been had I shown more gumption."

Katherine looked at the rolling snowdrifts that covered the rise on which the lilac bushes perched. She had played the course many times and she had always liked the secluded sixth green, with its quiet beauty and solitude. Now she imagined the young girl named Helen who decided her life's destiny there one June afternoon.

Helen interrupted Katherine's vision. "Could you take me back now? I feel a little tired all of a sudden."

Katherine suddenly felt a little tired herself. "Thanks for telling me about your green, Helen. I'll never look at the golf course in quite the same way."

Chris had prepared a conference room for them and made a fresh pot of decaffeinated coffee. She greeted the two icy women as the wind blew them into the office.

After Katherine walked Helen to the lobby of the Smiling Seniors, she checked to see if Leslie was in her office. The door was closed and a sign had been posted, indicating that Leslie would be gone for the rest of the day. Katherine returned to her car, but didn't immediately leave. Instead, she looked for Helen's car.

All tenants were assigned a parking stall at the time they rented an apartment. The stalls were sheltered by an aluminum roof that protected the vehicles from direct weather, but each one could be easily seen from the driveway. Most tenants owned modest cars and there were a couple of well used pick-up trucks. But the old Ford at the end of the row suddenly stood out for Katherine. It had to be the one. It was an antique

of some sort. She didn't know much about such things, but it had a certain classic beauty that even she could appreciate. The grey metal of the body looked heavy and its shape looked sculpted, rather than fabricated. Bright chrome framed the body, as though embracing it in an eternal hug. The wheels revealed the same polished silver aura. The headlights seemed outsized and the glass in the windshield seemed thick and fluid at the same time. Large mirrors hung majestically at each side, as though they showed the driver the entire world. Katherine was duly impressed. No wonder Helen just stood at her window to look at it. She was certain that Neal enjoyed his field trips in it. She also wondered what the market value for such a treasure might be and if there was any risk in it being in such a visible place.

Ann couldn't resist. "Especially to Meredith. I know she's spending that money on her worthless husband. He'll never amount to anything and I'm sure he can't wait for the check." Leslie Logan and Ann Carter had called Chris Mellon at the local Welfare Office as soon as Katherine left Leslie's office. Chris told them to come right over. Leslie grabbed Helen's file and they left together in Ann's Cadillac, disappearing into the heavy Wisconsin snowstorm.

Chris had prepared a conference room for them and made a fresh pot of decaffeinated coffee. She greeted the two icy women as the wind blew them into the office from the street. Chris took their wet coats and hung them on the public coat rack, just inside the door. "Please, let me hang these to dry and you ladies go to the conference room. Our coffee should be ready and I'll grab my tape recorder."

As the three women settled around the oblong table, a secretary came in with Helen's file. Leslie opened her own file on the table and Ann crossed her hands on her lap. Chris started her tape recorder as she opened the informal meeting. "So, we've had another crisis with Helen today? How many does this make since the judge ordered the hearing? Three, or is this the fourth?"

Leslie checked her record. "I count three prior to today. I had to reprimand her

on February 17, for shouting down the hall again. Her neighbors are worried for their safety when she screams like that and they call me to warn Helen to stop."

Ann shook her head and sipped her coffee as she listened.

"Then I had a report on March 5th from Helen's bank, another check to Meredith for \$500.00. That's the third one of that size this year. Helen has increased the amount she sends from \$425.00 to \$500.00. Her Social Security increase was only \$45.00, but her pension went up by \$125.00 in January. Apparently the investments in the pension went very well last year and at her age, she isn't predicted to live too many more years, so she benefited from the new formula. But still, that's too much money for her to send away."

Ann couldn't resist. "Especially to Meredith. I know she's spending that money on her worthless husband. He'll never amount to anything and I'm sure he can't wait for the checks to arrive."

Chris reminded them of the law in these matters. "You know that Helen has the right to do whatever she wants with her own money. Unless this guardianship thing goes through, she can continue to mail Meredith checks for as much as she wants, as often as she wants."

"I know. That's why we need to compare notes this way and help build a good case. I hate to see my aunt being taken advantage of by a family member." Ann sat back in her chair, looking satisfied with her observations on the matter.

Leslie resumed. "Well, before today's incident, there was one more item in March. She shouted and threatened three young boys with her cane in the parking lot. Neal had to go out and get her before someone called the police. The boys were looking at her old Ford. From what I could tell they hadn't harmed anything, but Helen accused them of wanting to damage it. The boys left after Neal told them it was private property and I don't think they returned, but I think Helen would have assaulted them if she hadn't been stopped."

Ann mumbled. "That old car. It will be one of the first things to go when I'm in charge. She can't drive it any more and if I sell it, it's worth more than enough to bury her."

Leslie closed her file and spoke to Chris. "Do you think we have enough to move the court date up, given what Helen did today?"

"Well, I don't know. None of these events were life threatening, although they are probably useful to our case. Something pretty severe needs to be presented to change court procedures. The case study usually takes a couple of months to do it right, and the volunteer assigned to Helen seems to take her job seriously. I don't think we should push this right now. I'll add the information you gave me to Helen's file, but that's about all we can do right now."

Leslie shrugged as she sighed deeply. "I was afraid of that, but at least we tried. It just seems like such a long time until May, especially with the level of tension she creates at the Smiling Seniors. People are losing patience. They really want to see her gone, so they don't have to worry about her anymore."

"Thanks, Liz. I have been taking them, but I've also started that morning walking program at the YMCA. There's usually about ten of us all together. I'll bet my cholesterol has dropped 10 points since last month. Maybe you should think about joining us. Eight times around the track is a mile and I've already walked as far as Sioux City."

CHAPTER SIX

Liz blushed into a crimson to match her dress. "Gee, Joe, I don't know about that. I haven't exercised much in years. I doubt if I could keep up with you."

"Molly, could you come over tonight? This quiet snow has made me feel lonely for some reason." Katherine sat in her kitchen, looking through a cookbook and listening to jazz on NPR.

"Oh, good. I'll fix us a light supper and start the fireplace. How does 6:30 sound? O.K. See you then."

Mary Yoder had reserved the community room for a tenant carry-in supper. This gave various women in the building the opportunity to use recipes that they wouldn't fix just for themselves and everyone had favorite dishes they looked forward to sampling. People brought plants and tablecloths to decorate the long tables and Mary ordered balloons to make the event even more festive. Joe Hawkins, who worked for years in a local appliance store, took pride in setting up his stereo and showing off his private collection of big-band albums. The snow outside seemed far away as residents walked down the long halls, carrying warm casseroles and special chilled Jello salads. The Smiling Seniors Apartment Complex earned its name at these monthly gatherings.

Liz Hurley was wearing her favorite red dress and shoes to match. She liked to dance and Joe was a favorite partner. She walked up to him as he tinkered with the back of his stereo. "Hi, Joe. You look chipper tonight. Are you still taking those vitamins I recommended? I think you have more color in your cheeks."

"Thanks, Liz. I have been taking them, but I've also started that morning walking program at the YMCA. There's usually about ten of us all together. I'll bet my cholesterol has dropped 10 points since last month. Maybe you should think about joining us. Eight times around the track is a mile and I've already walked as far as Sioux City."

Liz blushed into a crimson to match her dress. "Gee, Joe, I don't know about that. I haven't exercised much in years. I doubt if I could keep up with you."

"Oh, that's O.K. Us 'Old Hands' slow down and wait for the new ones to catch up. Before long you'll be burning the rubber as fast as we do. Think about it. It's fun."

Liz laughed and let Joe return to his business with the stereo.

Mary Yoder was directing traffic as people arrived. She showed them where to put their food and which places were still available at the tables. As the room filled, the smell of home-cooked food masked the standard cleaning-supply odor of the community room. Blending with the natural aromas produced in a crowd of people, the place started to feel like home. The party became a reunion and the noises made by the tenants were cheerful and warm.

At 5:45, Mary made her usual trip down the hall to invite Helen to join them for supper. She knocked gently on Helen's door and waited for a response. The door opened just a crack and Helen spoke through the dark opening. "Mary, I don't want to come to your party. I tell you this every month. Why do you keep coming back for me?"

"Because you have every right to be there. Just like the rest of us. I keep asking because someday I hope you'll walk down that hall with me and eat some really good food and listen to some happy music for an hour or so. You can keep saying no and I'll keep trying. Have a nice evening, Helen. I'll miss your company."

Helen eased the door closed and Mary walked back to the community room.

The food line had formed by the time Mary returned. The sound of clashing spoons and forks and knives mixed with the hum of thirty meaningless conversations

about the quality of the food tonight and the temperature of the room and the actual number of inches of snow outside. Joe's stereo sprang forth with Duke Ellington and people stopped to clap and congratulate him on his technical skills. Joe joined the food line and feet started tapping in unison with the easy beat of the music.

Alice Haan and Sue Wager sat across from Mary and Betsy. Mary always stayed near her sister, who was very shy in large groups. Alice was discussing the day's events with Sue when Mary and Betsy joined them. "You know the mail was really late today. I guess the truck got stuck over on Grant Street. It's a wonder there were any deliveries at all, with all this wet snow."

Sue agreed and seemed to know that the snow should have been expected. "Just last Sunday, at church, people were talking about how spring was going to be here any day. I think that tempts the Good Lord to prove to them that only He can control such things."

Alice nodded in complete agreement. "We can pray for an early spring, but the truth is that God holds all the cards. But, after all, March is pretty unpredictable most years."

"Oh my yes. My middle daughter, Sophie, was born in an ice storm the second week of April. It's a good thing she came so easy, 'cause we had to do it alone out at the farmhouse. My sister was there and she had helped with lots of deliveries, so everything came out fine. But that was the middle of April."

"Ya, I guess you need to expect that when you live in Wisconsin."

Betsy was eating quietly and listening to the two women when Mary invited her to join the conversation. "Betsy, didn't you have a bad experience in a late winter storm?"

Betsy shifted in her chair and scowled at Mary. "Oh, I guess you mean the accident."

"Of course that's what I meant. It nearly killed your husband. If you hadn't braved

the cold, you could have been a widow at a young age. I'm sure that Sue and Alice would love to hear your story."

Sue smiled and nodded at Betsy. "What happened, dear? Was there a terrible crash?"

"Well, a skid actually. Up by Fritz Lake. That road takes a sharp turn and the road was really icy. It was in April, too. We were both in the car and it slammed right into a tree."

Betsy needed to catch her breath from so much talking, so Mary filled in some information. "Betsy's husband, Fred, was unconscious and bleeding from a cut on his head. The ice storm was still raging outside and Betsy was only wearing a light spring coat. But, she got out of the car and walked all the way to the Stouder farmhouse, two miles away. I think Betsy was a hero, although she won't take any credit."

Betsy suddenly felt warm and excused herself to go to the rest room.

Alice was sympathetic. "You have such a sweet and quiet sister, Mary. You take very good care of her. Who would have thought she had the courage to do such a thing?"

Sue agreed that Betsy was a brave person as she rose to get a second helping of seven-layer salad.

There were only nine men living at the Smiling Seniors Apartments. Happily, all nine liked to attend these monthly gatherings, but there were far more women present, which meant that not all women could find a man to dance with. So, many of the women danced together. Since most of them had done this during their teen years before they could date, this arrangement seemed natural. Most of them were pretty good dancers, so even the perennial wallflowers enjoyed watching couples move smoothly around the small space.

As unofficial hostess of the event, Mary moved through the crowd often. She paused to talk to various people and enjoyed eavesdropping on fractions of simple conversations.

"... and then her daughter stopped by on the way home from church and took her to that Smorgasbord that the Diamond Hotel offers every Sunday. She said that she couldn't eat another thing that day, because of all she ate for lunch. We'll have to go over there some time and see what it's like."

"... but his doctor wouldn't hear of it. Now he gets his blood pressure checked every Tuesday morning by one of those Home Health Nurses. You know her. That young blond who wears those little pink glasses. Heather, I think her name is. She's really good with people and he looks forward to her visits, even if he is still mad at that doctor."

"... I know he visits her apartment. Sometimes late at night. I wouldn't worry about what they're doing, though. She's a good Christian woman and I've never heard anything bad about him. I don't know though. It seems a little odd to start a visit at 10:00."

"... Oh, I never bake it more than 3 hours. Sometimes I soak it overnight in vinegar and red pepper blend, but it gets so dry if I bake it longer than that."

"... next Thursday afternoon at Lincoln Grade School. She won the Sectional Speech contest and the awards celebration for students is at 2:00. I'm so excited for her. Her older brother Jake has always been such a good ball player and he gets most of the attention. This is her turn to have the family cheer for her."

"... Did you see that 'Young and the Restless' yesterday? I think Clint is going to guess that Brianna has been lying to him about the baby. I hope he gets back with Tammy. They always made such a sweet couple ..."

By 9:30, most of the tenants were gathering their belongings and saying good-bye to friends. Joe packed up the stereo and gently returned his albums to their cardboard jackets. After the room had cleared, Neal came by to stack the extra chairs and sweep the floor. A half-dozen brightly colored balloons had escaped the nuisance of their strings and clung joyfully to the ceiling. Neal let them hang there, knowing they would drift to the floor by mid-day tomorrow.

When he had finished, Neal walked down each of the halls in the building. He checked exits to be sure they were secure and listened for any unusual sounds as he walked past individual apartments. He had done his monthly check of smoke alarms earlier in the week and had just installed carbon monoxide detectors in each kitchen. Neal smiled as he passed Harold Reiner's place. Even with the door closed, Neal could hear Harold's loud rattling snore. How his wife had endured thirty-seven years of such noise was amazing, especially since Harold was so mild-mannered during the day. Neal made a mental note to tighten the latch on the southwest entry door tomorrow. He walked quietly back to his apartment, where he had left his computer on, waiting for one last check of the Asian numbers before he called it a day.

Katherine hung up and reached for the local phone book on the stand beside her bed. She found the number and with shaking fingers, dialed it slowly. "Hello, Neal, did I wake you?" Katherine called Stephen's Chicago number. Even after Molly's cheerful visit, Katherine felt restless. Maybe catching up with Stephen's busy life would give her some focus. After three rings, Stephen's sleepy voice came on the line. "Hello. Stephen Mitchell here."

"Hi, Stephen. Did I wake you?" Katherine. "What's on your mind?"

"Katherine . . . No . . . Well, yes, I guess you did. Is something wrong? Is it one of the girls?"

"Oh, nothing like that. I just can't seem to fall asleep and I thought I might catch you still up. I'm sorry. Go ahead and go back to sleep. You probably have lots to do in

the morning."

"I'm awake now. What's on your mind? Are you sure everything is O.K.?"

Katherine was suddenly sorry she had placed the call. Stephen seemed so activity-driven. She only wanted to talk. He expected her to ask him to do something.

"Really. I'm fine. I'll talk to you when you get here Friday. I feel better already."

"Well, there's really not much going on here, except work. Maybe it was better you didn't come along. I've had meetings and worked on drawings from early morning until late at night. I think I would have canceled a lot of special dinners downtown."

"Thanks for that news. Maybe I had a premonition."

Stephen laughed. "It's hard for me to imagine you as a gypsy fortune-teller."

"Madame Katherine - soothsayer extraordinaire."

Katherine laughed with him. "Maybe I just know you better than you think. Good night Stephen and good luck with your projects."

"Good night, Katherine. Sleep tight."

Katherine hung up and reached for the local phone book on the stand beside her bed. She found the number and with shaking fingers, dialed it slowly. "Hello, Neal, did I wake you? Oh, I'm sorry. This is Katherine Mitchell and I'm glad I didn't wake you. Why, yes. I'm O.K. I just wanted to talk to you about something. Do you have a few minutes?"

Neal carried his phone from the computer desk to his sofa, where he had left his brandy. "I have all the time in the world, Katherine. What's on your mind?" Katherine sat back against the pillows propped up at the head of her bed. "Helen, I guess. Did anybody tell you about this morning? Has Leslie called you in yet?"

Neal sat upright and put his brandy back on the coffee table. "You make that sound like I'm in some kind of trouble. I waved at Leslie early this morning, but I was

out in the snow all day. She was gone by the time I finished. What's going on?"

"You saw me bring Helen back from town just before lunch, didn't you?"

"Of course I did. I waved at you, remember? You saved me a trip back to the Black Forest to retrieve Helen. Thanks. Is that what this is about? Is Leslie in a snit because I drove Helen to the cafe?"

"Bingo. She said she's going to 'write you up' or something." Neal laughed heartily. "Is that what's bothering you? Leslie has a little paper to cover every event in the lives of every person in this building. She loves those little papers, but I think she's the only one who notices them much. If I'm in any serious trouble, I'll be happy to present my case to the board of directors. You really can stop worrying about it. Does that help?"

"Yes, it does help. Thank you. By the way, while I have you on the phone, what's with Helen's car? She said you keep it running for her."

"Oh, that's nothing either. She's not the only tenant I do it for. Of course, hers is the finest gem of all of them out there, but several people refuse to give up their cars to their years. I can't say that I blame them. Cars bring them freedom, even if it's only a dream. Seems harmless enough."

"Do you ever take her for a ride in her own car?"

"Sure. We get out together when the weather's right. We don't go very far, but she gets a chance to tell me about her road trips. That lady used to get around pretty good."

"She mentioned one to me. She talked about the stars in Arizona."

"Oh, yea, I think that's a favorite because it was the first one in this car. She often slept in the car on those trips. Did you know that? Can you imagine?"

"Actually, I can't. Oh, look at the time! I'm keeping you up after midnight. I'm so sorry, but I do appreciate what you told me. I think I'll sleep much better now."

"Don't worry about the time, Katherine. This isn't late for me and I enjoyed

talking with you. Bother me any night."

"Thanks. Good-night, Neal."

"Good-night."

Katherine felt relaxed and finally ready to call it a night. She leaned across the bed to turn off the light as she settled into the deep comforter, surrounding herself with warm pillows. She watched soft snow blow against the long window in her room while she imagined layers of stars fading into the dark sky beyond.

The next morning, Neal went to Leslie's office at exactly 8:00 a.m. as she unlocked her door. She was startled to see him waiting there, but she invited him in for coffee. "So Neal, what's on your mind so early? I usually don't see you in the lobby until later in the day. Is all the snow cleared away?"

"Why yes, Leslie. All the snow has been put in its place. I understand that I broke a policy yesterday and you plan to scold me for it. I'm here to get my twenty lashes and go about the rest of my day, if that's all right."

Leslie was annoyed at his flip attitude, but respected him enough not to mention it. "Well, I've calmed down some since yesterday's incident, so I don't suppose I need to make a big deal out of it. After all, it was an unusual circumstance, with the storm and all."

"Thank you Leslie. I appreciate the reprieve. I can't promise I won't do it again, but I'll try to be on my best behavior. Good coffee. Do you grind your own beans?"

Leslie smiled. "It's nice of you to notice. I do grind my own. It's one of those special treats I give myself sometimes. I really like a good cup of coffee, especially on a cold day like this. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No. Not today. Say 'Hi' to your husband for me. I haven't seen Ed in awhile"

"I'll do that. Thanks for stopping by."

Katherine decided to contact Ann Carter for lunch as soon as possible. She waited until 10:00 a.m. to call her, in case she liked to sleep in. "Good morning, Ann. This is Katherine Mitchell. How are you doing today? That's wonderful. I just thought I would follow up on that lunch date. Are you free any day this week?"

Ann still had a bad taste in her mouth from yesterday's encounter with Katherine, but she also wanted to convince her that Helen needed protection. "As a matter of fact, I'm free today, if that's possible for you." "That's just fine for me. I'll call the club and get us a table for 12:30. The golf course view should be beautiful today, with all this fresh snow."

"Thank you for the invitation, Katherine. I'll see you at 12:30."

The Club lobby seemed hushed in the presence of the Winter Wonderland outside. The wide windows in the dining area revealed a huge expanse of unmarked snow. The usual demarcations of sand trap and pond and green were erased, so that a smooth white field lay sparkling and undefined. Crystal glasses placed on each of the tables caught reflected patterns of sunlight and made the room awash with scattered iridescent glitter. Katherine paused before entering, feeling like an intruder in some mythical cathedral. She found her way to the table near the window and absorbed the experience while she waited for Ann.

When Ann arrived, she also paused before entering the bright room. She squinted and motioned for a waitress to pull the blinds. The waitress complied as Ann crossed the room to join Katherine. She shook Katherine's hand as she began speaking to her. "Blinding sun today. This snow sometimes gives me a headache. Have you ordered a drink yet?"

"Hello, Ann. No, I haven't ordered anything yet. I was just admiring the view."

A waitress approached their table with a water pitcher and filled their goblets.

"Would you ladies like to start with a some wine today?"

Ann spoke up. "No wine for me. I'll have a Vodka Tonic. What would you like, Katherine?"

"Just a Chardonnay. Thanks."

Ann began the conversation. "Well, I understand from talking to Ralph that Stephen is out of town on business most of the time. That must very difficult for you. I mean, now that your daughters are out on their own, you must get pretty lonely in that big house."

Katherine responded smoothly to set the tone for their meeting. "Oh, I've had to be on my own like this before. Stephen has always had to deal regularly with out-of-town customers. I have lots of friends and activities to keep me busy. And now I have Helen's situation to focus my attention on."

"And you do seem to take it very seriously. What has been the biggest surprise so far?"

"Oh, I guess I was surprised by her demeanor when I finally got a chance to speak with her. She's very bright, isn't she?"

Ann seemed uncomfortable. "Bright? Sure. Helen has always been the intellectual of the family. I guess that's one of the reasons she's so stubborn. She's always been able to find her own way in the world. Until now, of course. Her independence has finally gotten out of hand. She believes her decisions must be right, just because they're her own. But she must live in the world with the rest of us, after all. It's just taken her this long to find it out."

The waitress brought their drinks and the women ordered the lunch special, a cheese quiche and fresh fruit. The waitress left them a basket of warm bread and honey-butter. They each prepared a slice before continuing their talk.

Katherine asked, "You say that Helen needs to 'find something out'. What is it that she needs to learn?"

Ann chewed a few bites before answering. "She needs to learn what most of us have known all along. People are expected to behave in certain ways to get on in society. If everybody made their own decisions, without considering the rules, then where would we be?"

Katherine wanted to say something sarcastic, but she held it back. Instead she acted naive. She had stopped munching and leaned forward toward Ann. "What 'rules' are you talking about? Manners? Actual government laws? Church doctrine? Just which set of rules is she breaking?"

Ann tried to look away as the questions became too direct. "You know. All those things combined and none of them. I'm talking about the things we do to keep ourselves civilized that she chooses to ignore. Like not shouting down the halls. Like wearing different clothes every day, instead of the same suit year-round. Like eating with other people, instead of alone. Like saving some of your money, instead of giving it away. Oh, the list is a long one with her."

"You do make the guardianship sound inevitable. How do you suppose she made it on her own all those years? I understand she took cross-country trips in her car and even traveled to Europe a couple of times. Did she show any signs of instability earlier in her life?"

Ann took a large gulp of her Vodka Tonic. "Who would know? She was so far away from us. She never lived a really normal life, you know. She shared a house with that woman friend and she never married, even though there were some good opportunities. The family thought she at least knew enough to plan for her retirement, but we were even wrong about that. She has her pension and Social Security, but no other major investments. Her father would have been very disappointed in that."

"Her father was your grandfather, wasn't he? Did you know him very well?"

true. B Ann's demeanor softened as she remembered her grandfather. "He was so wonderful. You know he was a charter member of this club. He donated the land for the golf course and hired the designer himself. He wanted the course to be one of the best and most beautiful in the state. Before they tore it down a few years ago, you could see the old Grant homestead just past the end of the 4th green. We always had the best room here for family gatherings. Grandfather would even donate a huge Christmas tree for the foyer and invite the public for a Holiday Party. The whole town thought he was someone special. He made the Grant name stand for something."

school "It sounds like you have some fine memories of him. Did the family talk much about Helen and her life out East?"

the only "Sure. She even visited for a month or two almost every summer. She would stop through on each of her road trips while grandfather was still alive. I remember how fashionable she always was. I guess she was eccentric even then, but it seemed harmless and exotic. She played golf and tennis and poker. She even smoked, but Grandfather adored her. She wouldn't have been educated in such a far away place if he hadn't spoiled her rotten." Ann signaled to the waitress for another drink.

using h "Did the family expect her to return to Winterborne?"

job and "Of course. We thought she was a long-term investment in the family name. You know, with Madison and the University less than 50 miles away, we thought we might get a foothold in the state education system. She taught English, you know. She could have been assigned a college post right here in Wisconsin. But she never came back. She spent all her professional years in the Boston area. Too good for us, I guess."

"Do you really believe that's why she stayed away?"

make y "What other reason could she have?"

planned "Well, life can take some unplanned turns. Maybe there were reasons you didn't know."

decline Ann grunted and took the first sip of her second drink. "I suppose that could be

true. But knowing how grandfather felt about her, it must have been something remarkable. He talked about her eventual return to him all the time, right up until he died. He never said so, but I know she disappointed him more than anyone in the family."

"What about your father, was his name Randolph?"

Ann seemed uncomfortable again. "Oh, Daddy accepted Helen as his bossy big sister. She thought she had all the answers and she wasn't afraid to tell him so. He said she was always correcting his grammar and noticing his messy hair. She was gone to school though, by the time he was ten years old, so she became a distant threat more than a constant nuisance. He knew how Grandfather felt about her, but he also knew that as the only son, he would inherit all the property. So, he was patient about it."

Katherine wanted to explore new territory with Ann. "That's all really interesting, but how does Meredith fit into this package? Her grandmother Alpha was the middle child, right? Even though Helen was close to Alpha, I can't imagine she saw that much of Alpha's granddaughter. Why does Meredith get so much of Helen's attention?"

Ann shook her head and smiled at her Vodka Tonic. "Because the little girl is using her. She married a young man who squanders everything he earns in that factory job and then has Meredith beg her great-aunt Helen for money. Between the two of them, Meredith and Jeff bleed her dry all year long."

"But Helen seems adamant that she knows what she's doing. Maybe you have mistaken Meredith's motives. She does have a baby to care for, after all."

"Oh, the baby. I guess that makes the game they are playing O.K."

Katherine decided to change the subject before they ordered dessert. "I'm sorry to make you feel uncomfortable. Tell me, do you plan to attend the Spring Festival they planned for April? I understand that the Club is holding a big dinner and dance, with live music and lots of flowers from local vendors. I was asked to be on the committee, but I declined."

Ann perked up. "My yes, the Festival. That was an annual tradition when the Club first opened. My grandmother, Rosemary Grant, was an avid gardener and she loved to bring out her flowers as early in the year as possible. Helen favored her in looks. I think that's one of the reasons Grandfather was so partial to her. Grandmother Rosemary died when my father was only three. Grandfather lost a second son and his wife all in the same afternoon. He never really recovered from it."

"Oh, I hadn't heard that Helen lost her mother at such a young age."

"There are some people who believed that Grandfather sent Helen out East to school so he wouldn't see Rosemary's face every day. I don't agree, though, because he seemed to miss Helen so. But I guess we'll never know, will we?"

The waitress pushed the dessert cart in their direction and the women both ordered the strawberry cheesecake. As they sipped the rich, black coffee and delighted in their sweet indulgence, the conversation shifted to shopping trips and the price of good beef.

Katherine finished watching *Notorious* and put the video in the cabinet with the rest of her collection. She had planned to move on to *North by Northwest* to wrap up a Hitchcock. Helen felt tired. Fighting her way down the snow-packed sidewalks this morning had drained her energy. Instead of putting on her heavy wool coat for her afternoon trip to town, she opened the door to the hall and began the short journey to Neal's apartment. She tapped lightly on his door, but there was no answer. She sighed and turned toward the lobby. Her cane fell quietly on the sturdy carpet as she took each step toward Leslie's office. She didn't look forward to asking a favor of anyone, especially Leslie. But Neal wasn't home. She heard Leslie on the phone with someone as she approached the office. She knocked on the door and heard Leslie hang up. Leslie looked surprised when she saw Helen standing there. "Hello, Helen. You're early. Rent isn't due until next week. Have you lost track of the time?"

girls, Helen didn't make the sarcastic remark that was resting on the very edge of her tongue. Instead she spoke quietly and politely. "No, Leslie. In fact that's one reason I'm here. My late afternoon time is usually spent at the Black Forest. But with all this snow and the condition of the walks, I'm staying home today. I wondered if you could call Sheila at the restaurant and tell her I'm fine. She worries about me if I don't show up."

Leslie didn't routinely bend the rules, but she agreed to place a personal call for a tenant. "Just this once, Helen. You know I can't start spending my time on these kinds of favors. But the storm has thrown a lot of things off-kilter. I'll give Sheila a call. But don't you usually eat a little something when you go? What are you going to do for supper?"

Helen smiled broadly. "Mary brought me a plate of food from last night's party. It's more than enough to get me by. Thanks for your help."

Neal answered after the second ring. "Hello, Neal Parker here."

"Hi, did I catch you in the middle of anything? This is Katherine Mitchell."

Katherine finished watching *Notorious* and put the video in the cabinet with the rest of her collection. She had planned to move on to *North by Northwest* to wrap up a Hitchcock double feature, but then she decided she wasn't in the mood for watching verbal gymnastics after all. She turned on the television and went channel surfing, only to find no hope there either. She walked to the kitchen and stood in the middle of the room, wondering what she came to get. She turned around, switched off the light and decided to relax in a warm bath.

The water helped. She soaked and drifted into simple memories. She could hear the sound of her young daughters, laughing in the Club pool as she talked lazily with Molly. Sarah was scolding Christine for teasing little helpless Amy. A playful scuffle ensued, with Amy splashing water in the faces of her older sisters and running to Katherine for protection from their retaliation. Katherine had stood up from her webbed lounge chair and swept Amy up into her arms. Amy put her tongue out at the two other

girls, thinking she had been saved from them. Instead, Katherine carried Amy to the side of the pool and tossed her between the two vengeful sisters. Laughter and screaming and splashing filled the summer afternoon as the girls swam across the water to the diving area. Katherine could almost smell the chlorine as she remembered the scene.

Her bath water began to cool down and Katherine got out, instead of adding more warm water. She dried herself with a thick terry towel that matched the color of the mauve ceramic tile perfectly. She slipped into her favorite white eyelet nightgown and wrapped her long red flannel robe around it, leaving two inches of bleached cotton lace showing at her throat. She decided to walk back to the kitchen to make some hot herbal tea, but before leaving the room, she stopped to sit on the edge of the bed and she reached for the phone. She remembered the number from last night as she glanced at the clock. It was still only 10:15 and he had said he always stays up late. She dialed.

Neal answered after the second ring. "Hello, Neal Parker here."

"Hi, did I catch you in the middle of anything? This is Katherine Mitchell."

"Hello Katherine. It's great to hear your voice. Is something wrong?"

"I don't think so. I was just thinking about something you said yesterday. I had lunch with Ann today. She has some definite ideas about her aunt."

Neal leaned back on the sofa and switched the phone from his right ear to his left.

"I haven't talked much to Ann. She doesn't seem to like me much, you know."

"I've noticed that. What did you do to her?"

"Oh, the usual. I talked to her in a polite and friendly way. She thought that seemed impertinent in a maintenance man. I guess I don't stare at the floor enough in her presence. So, what did you two discuss that made you think of me?"

"Well, you mentioned that Leslie has papers and forms to fill out for lots of different things. Does she 'write up' tenants like she does her employee?"

"Sure. There are work orders for maintenance and repair projects. There are inventory sheets for things like smoke detectors and garbage disposals and things that are

portable enough to be taken from an apartment when someone leaves. And I think there's a special form for tenants who want to complain about their neighbors. There's some sort of procedure where a person can be evicted if they accumulate enough complaints. I'm sure Helen has plenty of those."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Ann used some terms that made it seem like Helen was heading for real trouble because she keeps breaking the rules. And I've noticed that Leslie and Ann seem to have a lot of private meetings."

"You're sounding a little paranoid there, Katherine. How unlike you." Neal chuckled in a low, teasing voice.

"How would you know?"

"It was a wild guess. You don't seem like someone who thinks people are out to get her. So, what did you have for lunch? I haven't been out to the Club since I left Harrison. I always liked their seafood crepes. Great sauce and fresh fish."

"I like that, too. But today the lunch special was a quiche and it was quite good. Wait a minute. How did you get me talking about food? I was asking you a serious question."

"I know. I like to change the subject sometimes. It relieves certain tensions I feel developing, like your unnatural paranoid perceptions."

"Thanks. I'll remember that about you."

"I hope you remember more than that."

Katherine caught her breath and laughed lightly. She wanted to say something that wouldn't reveal her sudden discomfort. She had passed on Hitchcock's homage to word games only to encounter them in person. "Of course, I remember lots of things about you. You have been very helpful to me in my pursuit of the truth."

"I hope to continue in that vein"

"Oh, look at the time again. I really must be going now. You have been a great help to me. Good-night."

schedule. "Talk to you soon. Good-night, Katherine." "a great time. You can go back to sleep and I'll call you again tomorrow."

"Try to get some sleep too, Dear. I agree that we'll have a great time together in Chicago." Katherine had barely fallen asleep when the phone rang. She was disoriented for a moment or two before she picked it up. In a very drowsy voice she said. "Hullo, this is Katherine." "Good night, Katherine."

"Hi, Honey. I guess I woke you up, huh?" Stephen sounded wide awake.

"Oh, hi. I'm waking up now. How's it going? Has something big happened?"

"Not really. Unless you call my missing you something big."

Katherine smiled broadly as the fog lifted from her eyelids. "What a nice thing to say, Stephen. Have you been drinking? Where did you go for supper?"

Stephen laughed at her response. "I guess it doesn't sound like me, huh? I just realized after you called last night, that I miss talking to you before I go to bed. We have some of our best conversations as we wrap up the events of the day. So, I thought I'd call and ask how your day went. Did you go anywhere or see anyone?"

"As a matter of fact, I had lunch with Ann Carter. It was quite nice and I hope we do it again. We should probably invite her and Ralph to dinner some time. Remind me and I'll call them next weekend after you get home."

"That sounds good. Maybe we could try for a week from Saturday. Say Katherine, the other reason I called was to find out if you could fit a week or two of Chicago into your schedule. I know you said you couldn't come for the whole time I'm here, but a little vacation together might be fun. What do you think?"

"O.K. Actually, that should work out just fine for me. Things have been moving right along on my assignment from the judge and I think I could manage a couple weeks off. I've talked to lots of people already and I even wrote a preliminary draft of my report. I'll check my calendar for April and we can set the details up this weekend."

"Thanks, Katherine. I'll look into theatre tickets and grab some museum

schedules to bring home with me. I think we'll have a great time. You can go back to sleep and I'll call you again tomorrow."

"Try to get some sleep too, Dear. I agree that we'll have a great time together in Chicago. Good-night, Stephen."

"I'll sleep like a rock now. I was beginning to feel really alone for some strange reason. Good night, Katherine."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Hi, Molly. It's Katherine. I'm calling to ask a favor."

"Sure. What can I do for you?" Molly and Katherine had traded many such favors over the years and it had strengthened their friendship, as well as easing the tight spots in their lives.

"Well, Stephen wants me to join him for a couple of weeks in Chicago. We were thinking about trying the second and third weeks in April."

"Oh, Katherine. You don't know how happy I am to hear that. I think you really hurt his feelings when you turned him down. What do you need? A house-sitter?"

"You are always a step ahead of me, Molly. That's exactly what I need. You do such a good job of making the place look lived in. In fact, you're welcome to move in if you need some retreat time."

Molly laughed at that thought. "And what would I retreat from? I have so much quiet in my life now that I sometimes think I'm single. No, I'll just visit your place every day. You haven't added any vicious pets I don't know about, have you? Should I bring a whip or anything?"

Katherine loved Molly's light attitude about most situations. "No. Everything is just the same as when you last did me this favor. That means I owe you a big one."

"I know. I'm running a tab. Wait 'til you hear what I ask of you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Katherine decided to visit Helen one more time before she left on her trip. Since Helen had no phone, Katherine simply stopped by at about 11:30 on Wednesday. Helen answered the door, looking and sounding tired. She brightened when she saw Katherine standing there. She opened the door wider and motioned for Katherine to enter. "How nice of you to visit me today. I have come of you. I haven't seen you around since that snow storm last week. But then, I haven't been out as much myself."

Katherine became concerned when she heard this comment. She looked more closely "Hi, Molly. It's Katherine. I'm calling to ask a favor."

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Katherine became concerned when she heard this comment. She looked more closely at Helen and noticed a high flush on her cheeks and a raspy quality to her voice. "Are you ill?"

"I'm not sure, but I do feel tired. Ever since that storm, I seem to be running on a low battery or something. Sheila and Mary Yoder have checked in and brought me food to get me by, but I've only been able to make one trip to town every day." She made her way to the wicker chair and lowered herself onto its thick cushion.

Katherine pulled out the desk chair and sat facing the suddenly frail-looking woman. "Do you have a physician I can call for you?"

"Oh, I'm not sure it's something that serious. It feels like one of those late winter colds that won't let go. I doubt if a doctor could do much for me."

"Please let me call mine for you just in case. He's a very nice man and I'm sure he would be happy to check you over for me." Katherine was digging through her bag to find her address book.

"Don't go to any trouble, really. I've had lots of colds before and I have a very strong constitution." Helen slumped back in her chair, as though just speaking had become an effort.

Katherine held up the small notebook she had found and spoke kindly, but firmly. "Helen, I'll be back in a few minutes. I'll call Dr. Miles and get you an appointment for

today. Then I'll drive you over to the clinic. Would you like a glass of water or something before I leave?"

"No. Thank you very much for your concern, but I feel like I'm putting you out over nothing. I really do plan to get over this on my own in a day or so."

"That's my plan too, Helen. I just want to get another opinion."

Katherine left Helen seated and dozing as she made her way down the hall to Neal's apartment. She knew she could go to Leslie's office to use a phone, but she would rather not involve her in the situation yet. She had no idea what kind of form might be required for a medical transport.

She knocked lightly on Neal's door and he responded almost immediately. Katherine's relief was apparent in her voice. "Oh, thank goodness you're home."

Neal was startled at both Katherine's sudden midday appearance and her worried expression. "What's happened?"

"It's Helen. She doesn't look well. It's probably just that virus that's been going around, but I'm sure she has a fever. Can I use your phone to call my doctor?"

Neal walked quickly to his desk and brought back his phone. "Do you have the number or do you need a phone book?"

"I have it right here, thanks."

She dialed and waited for an answer. The wait seemed like a long one and then the doctor came on the line. "Doctor Miles? Hi. It's Katherine Mitchell and I have an unusual situation I would like your help with. I'm here at the Smiling Seniors Apartments and a friend of mine is ill. She's 93 and has no personal physician. I wondered if you could make room in your schedule for her today. I would really appreciate it."

"Hi, Katherine. I haven't seen you in quite awhile. Sure. I'll take a look at your friend. I can see her right after lunch, if you can be here by 1:30. What's your friend's name?"

"Thanks, Tom. Her name is Helen Grant."

"I think I know who she is. She's the one who walks around town so much. She uses a cane doesn't she? And she wears a black wool beret?"

"You're very observant, Tom. That's just who it is and we'll see you at 1:30.

Thanks again."

When she finished her conversation, Neal was standing there with a glass of ice water. She thanked him for his thoughtfulness and handed him the phone. "I knew I hadn't seen Helen around as much this week, but I hadn't heard she was ill. Is it serious?"

"I don't know yet, but she said she was still walking to town once a day. I guess that says something. At least she wasn't bed-ridden and alone."

"I'm sure she'll be grateful for your concern."

Katherine chuckled lightly, "I don't know about that. I'm just glad I stopped by when I did and thanks again for the use of your phone. I wasn't excited about getting Leslie involved in this."

"I certainly understand why. The first person she'd call, even before she let you use the phone, would be Ann."

"I know. I'm sure Leslie is very aware of the local advantages in being Ann Grant Carter's confidante and personal informer. I'm going back to Helen's now to see if she needs help preparing for the trip to the clinic. I think Dr. Miles is cutting his lunch hour short to see her. He's such a nice man."

Neal followed Katherine to the door and held it open for her as she left. "Will you let me know how it works out? I'll be glad to run to the drugstore or pick up any supplies she might need."

Katherine paused in the doorway before going back to Helen's apartment. She smiled at Neal and agreed to keep him posted. "If there's anything at all you can do, I'll get back to you. But either way, I'll call and let you know what the doctor says."

Helen was lying across her bed when Katherine returned to the apartment. The door was open, so Katherine stepped inside and quietly called Helen's name. Helen answered her and sat up in bed. "Oh, so you came back. You didn't really call that doctor, did you?" "Why, yes I did. I told you I would and its good news, too. Dr. Miles can see you at 1:30 today. That's about an hour from now, so do you want to eat the lunch they brought before we go?" "We aren't going anywhere. I'll be just fine in another day or two. I'm not visiting any doctor. Thanks for your good intentions, but it isn't necessary."

Katherine's mouth fell open in surprise. "You can't mean that. You obviously aren't well and Dr. Miles has a fine reputation. He's also a friend of mine. That's how I got you in so quickly. I'll drive you over there and we won't even need to wait long, since you're the first patient after the lunch hour."

"You can talk all you want. I'm not going anywhere." Helen laid back and closed her eyes. She had removed her shoes and her thick support hose cupped her long toes as she curled her legs under her.

Katherine walked into the small bedroom and stood beside the simple iron bed. "Helen, this doesn't make any sense. Dr. Miles can keep this cold, or whatever you have, from getting any worse. How can you turn your back on something that will be good for you and get you back on your old schedule?"

"Because I don't believe that it matters. I'll either get better or I'll get worse. It's as simple as that, whether I see this doctor or not. Thanks for the thought, but I think I'll just take a little nap now. Good-bye, Katherine. Please close the door behind you."

"Helen, I must insist on this. I'm leaving town in a few days and I'll feel responsible if I leave you here and you continue to get worse while I'm gone. You can simply do this as a favor to me."

"I understand that you think you have my best interests in mind, but like I said,

I'm not going to any doctor today. Or any day. I hope you enjoy your trip and don't bother worrying over me. I'm long past an age where that matters much. I'll get by, you know."

Katherine stiffened and could feel herself getting angry and impatient. "Maybe you will and maybe you won't. I think you are being unreasonable and stubborn for no apparent reason. I just want to help."

"I thanked you for that and I also asked you to leave, so I can proceed with my nap. Good-bye, Katherine." Helen turned away and pulled a small blanket from the edge of the bed across her shoulders.

Katherine took a deep breath and began to say something, but changed her mind. Instead she quickly left the bedroom and Helen's apartment. She buttoned her camel coat and marched to her car. She had trouble focusing on her driving as she left the parking lot and muttered to herself about what to do next. She decided to drive home and call the doctor's office from there. She talked to traffic and street signs and turned up the stereo in her Lexus. "Stubborn old woman. No wonder people say she's crazy. Who, in her right mind, would turn down an offer of help like that? She'll probably die of pneumonia and I'll feel responsible for the rest of my life. Damn her."

As soon as Katherine returned home, she went to the kitchen and placed two calls. The first one was to cancel the appointment with Dr. Miles. The second was to Neal.

He was still in his apartment and answered immediately. "Neal Parker here."

"Hi, Neal. It's Katherine. I thought I'd better call and let you know what just happened. Queen E. decided to refuse my offer. She won't go to my doctor, or any doctor for that matter."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that, but I guess I'm not really surprised. Her independence is amazing. I am glad you made the effort, though. In the end, I guess that's as far as you can go."

Katherine sighed as she realized the truth in that. "Thanks for the reassurance,

Neal. It's just that I'm leaving town for a couple of weeks, to go to Chicago, and I worry about what may happen to her while I'm gone. I mean, I saw how ill she seemed and now that I know it, I feel responsible for acting on it."

"I understand, but I think you need to let her accept the consequences. Your heart is in the right place, but you have really done everything you can. I'll look in on her, if that helps any. I don't know if I can convince her to get medical help, but I can see that she's fed and warm. Does that ease your mind any?"

"Oh, thank you. That isn't really why I called, but I would appreciate it. I guess I owe you a favor."

"No, I think this evens the score a bit. You gave me the inside track on Leslie's plan to write me up for transporting Helen. I was able to keep her from acting on it, by surprising her first thing the next morning. If we keep trading favors like this, we could find ourselves being friends."

Katherine smiled for the first time since her argument with Helen. "I already consider you my friend, Neal. Why else would I memorize your phone number?"

"Thanks. Now, go pack for your trip and stop worrying over Helen. I'll be her nosy neighbor until she gets back on track or needs an ambulance. I'm just glad you let me know about the situation. We'll be fine, really."

"O.K. I'll check in after a few days though and see how things are going. Talk to you soon. Good-bye."

Katherine loved the Chicago skyline. She enjoyed driving in on the immense highway tangle that wove its way into the Loop and right up to the edge of Lake Michigan. She loved the noise and the smell of exhaust on the crowded streets. She parked her car in the reserved underground lot and made her way to the sidewalk above as the wrangle of voices grew louder. As she burst onto Michigan Avenue, she was again

entranced by the motion and the color and absolute life of the noise. She stood at the parking garage entrance for awhile and simply listened. She heard pieces of conversations in a wonderful array of languages. She heard boat traffic on the river and the roar of sirens as a fire truck fought its way onto Michigan from a side street. Filled with the listening, she watched as pedestrians ignored lights and cars inched between herds of bustling bodies. People carried paper bags with store names and leather bags with designer names and canvas bags with museum names. Names and faces and feet and color. All these images mixed and became muted against great expanses of grey stone and mortar and bricks of the huge buildings lining the boulevard. Katherine took a deep breath and couldn't wait for night to fall.

Stephen had chosen the apartment's location very well. Within walking distance, they would have a wonderful selection of restaurants and entertainment. For a few moments after arriving, Katherine was sorry she had declined the original offer - especially given her recent encounter with Helen. Stephen had left a key for her with the front desk, so she let herself in. The place was relatively small, but very elegant. There was a note addressed to her, next to a vase of fresh flowers. The hand-written message was from Stephen. He hoped she had a safe trip and he had left her some cold chicken and a green salad, if she hadn't eaten yet. They had dinner reservations for 8:00 and he looked forward to seeing her.

Katherine found the chicken and the bathroom and the wonderful view from the living room window. She opened the heavy drapes and looked over the traffic below to discover the glistening water of Lake Michigan. The rooftops of several lower buildings covered the area to Lake Shore Drive and then the water appeared endless. And now in mid-April it was water again. Sometimes this early in spring, the ice would be holding back the movement of waves. But not this year. The heaving water formed cold looking gray mounds that lurched against the shore, but they were definitely liquid. Wide-winged birds with long fishing bills glided up and down on the strong winds blowing across the

city shore. A few hearty boats bounced against their piers and shadows of freighters could be seen against the distant horizon. The commercial season for lake transport would be long this year. Katherine wondered about Neal's investments and if any of them would profit from the extra weeks of water travel.

Just then, Stephen came smiling into the room. "How do you like the place? I think we got damn lucky."

Katherine walked over to him and kissed him hello. "Thank you. It's perfect and you're right. We are lucky to have such a location on short notice."

"Did Henry see that all your things were brought up from the car?"

"Yes. He seems very nice and they were all very helpful at the front desk, with the key and everything. They seemed to be expecting me."

"Of course. I told them that a beautiful blonde woman would be here to get the key to my apartment and they were to treat her well. You met the description and they did their job."

"Oh, so next time they will provide the same service for your red-head or brunette?"

"Of course, Katherine. Discretion is important in their line of work."

They laughed together at these and sat down on the sofa facing the lake view to get caught up on family business and Winterborne gossip. Katherine told him about the problems she had with Helen and Stephen told her about the delay in delivery of an important component of his new product. The conversation was very much like most of theirs at home in Wisconsin, except now they were in an exotic location with new smells and sounds. This made the substance of their revelations seem more appealing. They continued to talk like this while they changed to go out to dinner and then all the way through dinner. By the time they returned to the apartment at 11:00, they were finally caught-up with their lives and exhausted. Earlier they considered making love, but they found themselves too exhausted to try by the time they went to bed. They hugged

instead, and promised each other to make up for it tomorrow.

The next day, Stephen left for work by 6:30. Katherine slept in, and was pleased that Stephen had made coffee and it was still warm. She found bagels in the freezer and cream cheese in the refrigerator. She cut a grapefruit in half and decided she was set until lunch. She called the front desk and requested that a morning paper be delivered for the next two weeks. Stephen liked to read his paper at work, often during lunch alone at his desk. She wanted to have that luxury every morning during her stay while she glanced out the window at the movement of the lake. She noticed that the Monet exhibit was in town until May 1, but it was sold out. Stephen must know somebody who could get her in. She would ask him later over dinner. She decided to shop downtown, since it was sunny and bright and Marshall Fields was only a few blocks away. She hadn't been shopping in Chicago since Christmas when the brilliant decorated streets were the best part of the holiday trip. Now on this warm April day she felt like spring and wanted to buy something pink to wear tonight. Katherine smiled out the window at the city and went to take a hot shower.

The phone rang as Katherine pulled her terry robe around her. Stephen said good morning and told her that he had been talking to his new client about things to do in the city for the next few days. Paul Foster had invited them to dinner with his wife, Jane, and Stephen wanted to know if he should accept the invitation. Katherine told Stephen that she'd be happy to meet them and asked what time she should be ready. Stephen said he would be by to get her at about 7:00 and Katherine became even more excited about finding that perfect pink suit.

The Chicago air blew in circles as Katherine made her way to Marshall Field's. The bustle of mid-day felt exactly as it had for the twenty years she had visited the Loop. The noise of the cars and overhead trains outside made the interior of the fine old department store seem hushed in comparison. She admired the recent restorations and additions to its huge open spaces. Slow moving free-standing escalators gave tourist

views to shoppers traveling between departments. Katherine checked the directory and climbed aboard to reach the sixth floor. She traveled through seas of golden accessories and ridges of shoe racks and mountains of piled lingerie before reaching her destination. Then, she stepped into clouds of floating fabric, draped across plastic hangers suspended from endless rows of racks. Her eyes sought pink.

After ninety minutes of rose pink and cotton candy pink and mauve, Katherine found a Chanel suit in a lovely shade of dark green. She suddenly decided she wanted to feel more like the stem than the flower this spring. She wasn't sure why, but at this moment pink felt absolutely frivolous to her. She tried to remember if she had ever owned a green suit. She couldn't recall one. She did remember her mother telling her once that green tended to make her skin look yellow. She checked the full-length mirror and studied the hue of her skin. It looked rosy and glowing in the store's florescent lights. Mother had been dead for twelve years. Katherine bought the suit.

Paul and Jane Foster were seated at a booth near the back of the candle-lit restaurant when Stephen and Katherine joined them. An open bottle of a good dry white wine sat in the middle of the round table and Paul offered each of them a glass. Stephen declined, saying he would rather have a Scotch. After appropriate introductions and settling in, Jane and Katherine felt comfortable together immediately, smiling and nodding as they discussed the Monet exhibit and the view of the lake from the apartment. Jane offered to spend some time with Katherine during her days in the city, if she liked. "I know that you've made some plans for what you'd like to do and see, but I would be happy to keep you company. What do you think?" "This is such a pleasant surprise for me. I went shopping today, all by myself, and it would have been great to have someone there to help me decide on things - like the color of this suit. It's actually green, you know."

Both women laughed at that comment, sharing an understanding of how difficult green can be. Jane added, "I had a green blouse once that made every vein on my neck look purple."

Such light conversation carried them through three quick hours and Katherine was suddenly very pleased with Stephen's decision to take this client so seriously. She felt like they could develop a friendship that could call her to Chicago frequently. She mentioned this to him on their way back to the apartment. "Why didn't you tell me what pleasant people you were doing business with? I expected some dry, cigar-smoking Chicago Boss type. I guess I need to reset my stereotype."

"Isn't it great? Paul and I hit it off, just like tonight, the first time we met. He even has season tickets to the Bulls games. That's how good it gets."

Katherine chuckled at Stephen's standard for true friendship. "So, do you think they can get me in to see Monet?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if that's part of Jane's plans for you one day this week"

"I can tell the time I'm here is going to fly by."

Katherine wrote the number on the pad beside the phone. "Thanks Jane, that sounds good. I'll get right back to you."

When they got back to the apartment, the drapes were still open and the lights of the high-rise buildings beyond filled the dark room with a golden haze. They didn't turn on the lights, but started to undress one another in the artificial dusk. Katherine unbuttoned Stephen's shirt and pulled its long cotton tail out from his leather-belted waist. They fell onto the couch as Stephen pushed her new green skirt up to her back. She eased out of her pantyhose and Stephen pulled down her panties with one quick movement. By then, Katherine had his trousers thrown over the sofa and she rolled his cotton briefs onto the floor, beside her white lace panties. In this misty golden haze they explored skin and found crevices and murmured. It became a delightful pleasure for them, to be in this strange place with such familiar rituals. They fell asleep, askew on the

sofa. At about 3:00 a.m. they foggily moved to the bedroom to finish their sleep.

Katherine awoke to the phone ringing on the table beside the bed. It startled her and she sat upright, disoriented for a moment as she realized she was naked in a strange bed in a strange room. Then, it came back to her and she picked-up the phone. Groggily, she said, "Hullo, this is Katherine Mitchell."

"Good morning, Katherine. I'm sorry, it sounds like I woke you up. This is Jane Foster, from last night?"

"Oh, Jane, of course. No, it's fine that you woke me. I just need to get my bearings."

Jane laughed politely and replied, "I know how that feels. Paul and I have traveled a great deal and there's nothing more disorienting than suddenly waking up in a strange place. Do you want to call me back in a few minutes? My number here is 252-7935."

Katherine wrote the number on the pad beside the phone. "Thanks Jane, that sounds good. I'll get right back to you."

After Katherine hung up, she went to the bathroom and then to the kitchen. She found coffee and a note from Stephen, telling her he'd call her later to make plans for tonight. She then returned the call to Jane and they made arrangements to meet for lunch before touring the Museum of Contemporary Art. Jane opened the apartment door to find the *Chicago Tribune* on the floor and returned to the living room and her marvelous view. She sat lazily for a whole hour, reading through the thick paper and sipping three cups of coffee. She felt relaxed and happy.

Jane and Katherine spent the next few days together, talking and touring and becoming reacquainted with their favorite Chicago haunts. Jane knew special restaurants that the tourists hadn't yet found and Katherine fulfilled her dream of seeing the Monet exhibit. By their fifth day together, they felt like they had been friends for years. Their husbands were thrilled to know that the women were getting along, because they had been busy making plans of their own. On Tuesday evening of the second week, Stephen and Paul made reservations at a quiet downtown restaurant and requested a secluded table in the corner, because they had exciting news to share with Katherine.

Stephen sipped his Scotch and tried to gauge Katherine's mood as she laughed and chatted with Jane. His announcement should be well received in this environment, so he began. "Katherine, have you noticed how much I've been discussing production costs associated with this new project? I know you don't get involved in my business, but it's been an important topic for Paul and me."

Katherine was accustomed to listening to talk of Stephen's business but not being asked for input. She smiled at the notion of his asking for her advice. "Why no, Stephen, I can honestly say I haven't been paying that much attention to those details. Is there a reason I should? Are you trying to hire me?"

Stephen laughed and answered her. "No, Katherine. If we ever worked together, our marriage wouldn't survive. I really need the oasis you've built for me. Keep up your good work and I'll keep up mine. But what Paul and I are planning could give us an additional home, in Puerto Rico. How would you like to own an island get-away?"

Katherine's eyes got wide as she absorbed the question. "What on earth are you talking about? Puerto Rico? Why would we own a house there?"

"Because I may open a branch of my business on the island. Paul has offered to be my partner and we have put together a contract to set it in motion. I just wanted to get some feedback from you before we sign the deal. It would mean I would be spending at least six months every year working down there. That warrants buying a house and

gets now. It makes lots of sense if you think it through, Katherine."

"I'm sorry if I don't sound supportive. It's just such a surprise. I had no idea you had been discussing anything like this."

Paul decided to join the conversation. "I guess part of this is my fault. I asked Stephen not to mention this to anyone until we were ready to move forward with the plan. I didn't want somebody to get wind of the story before we had negotiated for the land in Puerto Rico. I didn't want this to fall into the hands of a speculator."

Katherine gave a reassuring smile to Paul. "Oh, I understand that you waited for a good reason. I just need a little time to absorb it. How soon will it all happen?" Stephen and Paul exchanged glances and Stephen answered her. "Ground breaking for the Puerto Rico plant is set for July 1. We are putting out the bids for contract next week. Once that happens, it's liable to reach the local newspapers and people could be asking you questions. It seemed important to give you the inside information before the phone starts ringing at home."

"You make it sound like espionage of some kind. I mean, 'company secrets' and 'inside information' aren't usually part of our dinner conversation."

Stephen took another sip of Scotch and signaled for the waiter to refill his glass. "I know, and I'm genuinely sorry about that, but there's a lot at stake for us. We saved some money by getting the Puerto Rico land as soon as we did and I know that the Winterborne move is going to make a lot of people unhappy. The whole thing will blow over in a few months and we can begin living our new lives openly again. But for now, I would appreciate it if you didn't mention it to anyone back home, even Molly."

"And why not? Molly can keep a secret for me. She is my best friend, you know."

"Please, Katherine. She is also a loving wife and I don't want Phil to hear about this until I tell him myself. O.K.?"

Katherine finished her wine and signaled the waiter for a refill. "This is sounding

more weird all the time. Why shouldn't Phil know? I thought he was your best friend. He is in a totally different business than you, so it's not like he'd care about your big secret."

Stephen shook his head and smiled knowingly. "Phil's on the town council - or did you forget? He'd have a hard time not telling those people that almost a hundred jobs are leaving the community. As an elected official he won't be exactly happy about that news, even if he is my friend."

Katherine frowned at him. "Oh, yeah. I guess friendship does have its limits. Now I believe we should change the subject and eat dinner. I'm sorry, but I need to think about this before I can ask any good questions."

Jane had not spoken since the discussion had turned to the Puerto Rico move. She now smiled and said, "I agree. It's time to look over this wonderful menu and enjoy our dinner. It's already almost 9:00 and they'll throw us out if we keep this table too much longer without ordering."

The conversation became safe again as they chose just the right wine to go with the house specialty. Katherine only half listened as people spoke around her. She couldn't decide if she was excited about looking for a house in Puerto Rico or chagrined at the damage they were doing to the loyal workers in Winterborne. She knew she was getting a headache and she suddenly wasn't very hungry.

Katherine leaned over and spoke softly to Stephen. "Dear, I don't think I can stay for dinner. I feel a headache coming on and my stomach is throwing fits. I'd like to return to the apartment, but you can stay on."

Stephen took her hand. "Is it what we talked about tonight? I can drive you back. Jane and Paul won't mind."

"No, really. I'm just going to take some Advil and crawl into bed. You stay here and enjoy yourself. I should be fine by morning."

"O.K. But let me get you a cab."

They explained the situation to Jane and Paul, who offered to leave as well. Katherine reiterated what she had told Stephen and they waited at the table for his return, after offering their concern to Katherine. She promised to call Jane the next day and perhaps they could do lunch.

Stephen ordered a taxi and waited with Katherine at the door until it arrived. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"No, honestly. Stay and talk some more with Paul. You must have a lot of plans to make. I'm sorry to leave Jane stranded, but I really don't feel well at all."

"O.K. I'll be back by midnight. I hope the sleep helps."

Stephen returned to his dinner and Katherine returned to the apartment. She opened the drapes when she arrived and sat in the dark for half an hour, admiring the grand lights of the city. Then she reached for the phone and called Neal. "Hi. It's me. Are you busy?"

Neal had been dozing on his sofa while he watched the local news on TV. "Ah, no, Katherine, I'm everything but busy. It's good to hear your voice. Are you still in Chicago?"

"Yes. I'm sitting here in the dark, admiring my view. It's very nice."

"I'm glad to hear it. I know you were looking forward to the get-away. What can I do for you? Are you calling about Helen?"

"Oh, yeah, Helen. How is she? I'm sorry. I was so involved here that I had almost forgotten she was sick. Did you ever get her to a doctor?"

Neal chuckled. "What do you think? I offered every day, twice a day for a week. She sputtered at me and told me to go away and worry over somebody else. Then, on about the eighth day, she seemed like her old self. She was back on her regular schedule and she teased me about the need for a doctor. Stubborn old queen."

Katherine smiled and shook her head. "Well, so much for being a good Samaritan. Thanks for the effort. I guess she was lucky again, but I didn't know how

sick she might have become. I'm just glad it worked out for her."

"So if you didn't call to find out about Helen, then what's on your mind?"

"Oh, nothing I guess. I was just thinking about your old job at Harrison. Did you say that some of the workers were offered the chance to move with the plant?"

"Yeah. They could have kept their positions if they wanted to take less money and move their families to Mexico. Not many of them did. Why?"

"Oh, just something that came up at dinner. You know, small talk. I couldn't remember exactly what you had told me and I was curious about it. That's all."

"I guess I could become offended at the notion that something so important to personal friends of mine was considered "small talk" down there in Chicago."

"I didn't mean it that way. We weren't even talking about Harrison Tool. It was just that the conversation had drifted into tax breaks and international trade. You know, the usual social stuff."

"Oh, yeah, I forget what a serious thing dining out can be sometimes. So, was the food good?"

"I don't know. I came back here to the apartment with a headache. I'm sure they are enjoying their dinner even as we speak."

Neal seemed surprised at this revelation. "So, you came back just to call me and ask about Harrison? How small was this talk?"

Katherine worried that she had said too much. "Small. Trust me. I have a headache and I felt restless. Using the phone seemed like a good idea at the time. Who else could I politely call at this hour? I thought you wouldn't mind. Sorry I bothered you."

"You know you didn't bother me. It was nice to hear from you. I'm sorry to hear you aren't feeling well. And you were right - I don't mind if you call at this hour. When do you plan to be back in town?"

"I was supposed to return next Sunday, but I may come home tomorrow if I don't

feel any better. Somehow Chicago's lights seem dimmer when your head is throbbing." "Well, give me a call when you return. I would like to take you somewhere, if you're interested." Katherine was startled by the comment. "Take me somewhere? Like a date? I hope you haven't gotten the wrong impression of me." Neal laughed aloud. "No. When you see the place I'm taking you, you'll understand that it's hardly a social call. I'll explain it when I see you. Now, go to bed and ease your headache into quiet dreams."

"Thanks. I think I will. I'll call you when I get back. Good-night, Neal."

"Good night, Katherine."

The next morning, Stephen could not understand why Katherine was up early, packing to go back home. "But we have so much to discuss now. If anything, I thought you might extend your visit for another week, so we could work through some details about the new plant and what it means to us, as a family. The girls will have to be told that we'll be living in Puerto Rico half of the year. We need to discuss what we'll need in a house and we'll have to figure out what to do with the Winterborne place while we're away. Why are you leaving?"

"I told you, Stephen. I think I may be coming down with something. If that's true, I would like Amy and Molly around to help me with things. What's so difficult for you to understand about that?"

"O.K. I'll try to believe that's all this is. But, you've been a little withdrawn ever since I told you about the new plant. I thought you would want to help me celebrate our good fortune. If this works, it could mean some real money. Not just comfort, but a solid future for us and the girls. Instead, you get sick."

"Well, excuse me for not planning my illnesses according to your schedule for

me. I am fine to drive myself home and I'll call to let you know when I get there. If you could call the front desk, my things are ready to be put in the car."

Stephen kissed her on the cheek and pulled on his trench coat as he walked to the door. "I'll just tell them in person as I leave. Have a nice trip home, Katherine. Leave word with my secretary if I'm not available when you call. It's been fun having you here."

Katherine watched the door close behind him and then turned for a last look at the view from the wide window. Clouds were forming over the lake as the sun tried to leave shadows against the white caps on the dark gray water. The wind had started to blow and she could see people pulling their coats around themselves as they leaned into it. She suddenly longed for the quiet easy comfort of her Lexus and the familiar streets of Winterborne.

Katherine had hoped to see her. "Hi, Mary. I wanted to thank you for your attention to Helen last week. She seemed pretty sick when I left, but apparently she's improved. I'm on my way to visit her now." "Oh, it was nothing really. I like the old bat, but I just don't think she knows what's good for her. I turn into a real mother hen sometimes, just ask my sister. By the way, how was your trip? You went to Chicago, didn't you?"

"Yes I did. My husband's been working on a project there for the last couple of months. I like visiting Chicago, I find it relaxing and invigorating all at the same time, so I try to get down there several times a year. It's always good to come home, though. I guess that's true for everybody."

"Oh, I know how that is. Ed and I used to take the kids on long car trips every summer. We have albums full of pictures from the Grand Canyon and California and Maine. Ed loved to take pictures and I can honestly say our whole herd of wild children traveled really well. We all laughed and sang and ate our way across America. Some of

my best memories. Yet, coming home turned out to be the best part."

"Have you always lived in Winterborne?"

"Me? No. My family came from the flatlands, down in Illinois. Ed never let me forget that. You know how Wisconsin people feel about us flatlanders. But then, we never really lived right in Winterborne. Until Ed died, we farmed 300 acres and kept 20 cows, about seven miles south of here. It was a great place to raise kids and gardens.

Well, I gotta get back to the ladies. CHAPTER EIGHT

Katherine watched as Mary returned to the gossiping group. She wore her usual sweats and matching enamel earrings. So far, Katherine had seen her in sweat suits of

purple. The usual crowd had gathered in the lobby of the Smiling Seniors Apartments the next morning, as Katherine arrived to check on Helen. Sheila had confirmed that Helen had finished breakfast and started home about an hour ago. Mary Yoder left her group of friends to approach Katherine as she entered the building.

Katherine had hoped to see her. "Hi, Mary. I wanted to thank you for your attention to Helen last week. She seemed pretty sick when I left, but apparently she's improved. I'm on my way to visit her now."

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my best memories. Yet, coming home turned out to be the best part."

"Have you always lived in Winterborne?"

"Me? No. My family came from the flatlands, down in Illinois. Ed never let me forget that. You know how Wisconsin people feel about us flatlanders. But then, we never really lived right in Winterborne. Until Ed died, we farmed 300 acres and kept 20 cows, about seven miles south of here. It was a great place to raise kids and gardens.

Well, I gotta get back to the ladies. Say 'Hi' to Helen for me."

Katherine watched as Mary returned to the gossiping group. She wore her usual sweats and matching enamel earrings. So far, Katherine had seen her in sweat suits of purple, red, aqua and pink. She wondered how Mary found earrings to match the bright fabric so perfectly. Katherine realized that every time she finished talking to Mary, she smiled. She didn't know many people who caused her to react that way.

Helen opened her door only a crack when Katherine knocked. When she saw who was standing there, she pulled it wider and invited Katherine in. "Hello, I guess I look different from when you saw me last."

Katherine stepped inside and closed the door behind her. "Yes, Helen, you do. But I still believe you should have seen my doctor. If nothing else, you need a professional relationship with one of the doctors in town. What if something really serious happens? Who will they call? It'll probably be some young intern on emergency room duty who they shipped over from Madison."

Helen began laughing. "I'll be a good case study for him, won't I? His patient will be a stubborn old woman with no medical history and no records read through. He'll have to solve my problem (whatever it is) by observation and skill. I think it will be fun watching him try."

Katherine shook her head and moved toward the desk chair in the living room.

She began removing her coat. "Do you mind if I stay for a few minutes and talk with you?" "Oh, I didn't know about that arrangement with Sheila. She helps you a lot,

doesn't." "No. I don't mind - as long as you don't call any more doctors."

"I promise I won't call anybody. I've been out of town for a few days and I thought I'd stop by now that I'm back. I have some more questions for you, but you don't need to answer any of them if you don't want to."

Helen sat in the wicker chair and put her cane across her lap. "Let the inquisition begin."

Katherine bristled at the term. "I'm sorry if that's how this feels. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. Maybe you can just start talking about yourself, instead of me asking questions. I really just want to get to know you."

"Thank you. I guess I don't know exactly what it is you want. My life seems simple enough to me. I get up. I groom. I dress myself and make my bed. I look out the window and check the weather. I listen to the sounds of the building waking up and I leave to get breakfast. I come back for lunch and rest awhile on my bed. I go back to town for afternoon tea and come home for a quiet evening of letter writing and contemplation. There's not much to it, but now that I've told you the total of my exciting life - does it help you?"

"Not really. Many people believe that your walks to town are not in your own best interests. They think you're too dependent on outside sources for food and you shout at people sometimes. I noticed that you don't have a phone or a TV. You do seem a little isolated for someone who was as involved in life as you were for so many years."

Helen paused before she answered. She stroked her cane and seemed to be thinking of something far away. "I know. Sometimes I think I should get a TV and a phone to make everybody happy. But, I know I wouldn't use them anyway. TV is not interesting to me and I fear that most of my calls would be long distance. If I really need to talk to somebody, I use the phone in the Black Forest. Sheila lets me talk, even long

distance to Meredith, and then I pay it with my food bill. It works fine for me."

"Oh, I didn't know about that arrangement with Sheila. She helps you a lot, doesn't she?"

"Sheila leaves me alone when I want to be and she gives me some help when I ask for it. I think she's better than family that way. Unlike Ann, Sheila doesn't expect anything from me. With Ann, there's always a price for everything. She's not a very generous person, you know."

Katherine had never heard Helen talk about Ann in detail before. She wanted to follow up on what Helen meant by her comment. "I know Ann a little. She works on lots of committees and is involved with major fund-raisers. She seems very generous with her time, I think."

Helen stood up and leaned on her cane. She suddenly had a severe and angry look on her face. "Public generosity is not the same as family business. Ann is crazy. She thinks she can control her own money and my money and Meredith's money and someday, the town's money. She can't get the town's money until I am driven off the streets. It's been nice chatting with you again, but please get out of my apartment. You've heard enough."

Katherine was taken back by Helen's sudden change of mood. She stood up and grabbed her coat. "Well, thank you for your time, Helen. I'm sorry to hear how you feel about Ann. This is difficult for everyone, you know."

"What I know is what I know and now it's time for me to eat lunch. Please do as I asked and go. We can talk more another day."

Katherine followed Helen's instructions and stepped out into the hall. The Mobile Meals volunteer was bringing Helen's food tray to her, so Katherine stepped aside to let her knock on Helen's door. Helen opened the door and the worker walked in to set the food on the kitchen counter. Katherine watched Helen walk to her desk as she asked the volunteer to close the door behind her.

Neal was in his apartment when Katherine rang the bell and after he opened the door to greet her, he asked her to join him for lunch. She accepted and they sat in his small kitchen, eating grilled cheese sandwiches, tomatoes and hot chocolate. The conversation was trivial and funny, until Katherine mentioned her visit to Helen and what she had said. "I was so surprised. I mean, Helen had just been describing her typical day and making her world seem perfectly ordinary, when she mentioned Ann and then threw me out. I still don't know where that reaction came from."

"It came from 93 years of family life. Doesn't your crowd keep any skeletons?"

"Stop teasing about this, Neal. It seems serious. After all, we are talking about Helen's whole future."

"What made you think I was teasing? I happen to think that families are as dangerous a force as anything on earth. They are like weather fronts - unpredictable and varied. All a person can do is hope for sunny days. Nobody can make them happen."

Katherine sipped her cocoa and studied Neal's expression as he said this. "You aren't talking about Helen, are you? What secret from your family are you carrying around?"

"That's the secret, Katherine. My planned family package never came together. My fiancée and I bought that nice house I told you about. Two months before the wedding, a semi crossed the center line and canceled the event. Gretchen was killed instantly."

Neal's revelation was both sudden and unexpected. Katherine felt like she was about to cry as she reached across the table and put her hand over Neal's. "I'm sorry. I had no idea, but that does explain a few things. Is it one of the reasons you've stayed on? I mean, was Gretchen from Winterborne?"

"Yes and no. You're right about her hometown being Winterborne. She grew up

in a nice white house a few blocks from here, then she went to college in Madison and she had just landed a really good job when the accident happened. There are still lots of memories of her wherever I go. But no, that's not exactly why I stayed around when Harrison closed down. That's a more difficult question. I guess I stayed so I could think in peace for awhile. Do you know anything about grief?"

"How do you mean? Are you asking if I've grieved myself, or if I've studied it?"

"Both. Or either one. I don't know for sure. I just know that after Gretchen died and the plant closed, I couldn't imagine a world without loss. It coated everything I saw. So being an extremely bright and logical person, I decided I should stay put until the fog cleared. And now, sometimes I get a little restless and ready to move on. I think that means it's working."

"I guess so. But you don't seem particularly depressed - I mean like what I expect of a grieving person. I've never seen you gloomy. In fact, I usually call you when I want to hear a light voice. I expect a joke or a goofy observation or some reassurance. So where do you hide your sad and angry self? Isn't that how they define grief - sad and angry?"

"I don't know much about that part. I feel sad sometimes and when I think about the Harrison deal I still get angry, but why should I share it so easily? I didn't stay on so I could find sympathy. I only wanted time alone so I could lick my wounds in the cave - you know - basic stuff. Well, now I've told you my family secret, so what's yours?"

Katherine wasn't prepared for the question, so she gave him an unrehearsed honest answer. "My husband wants to act like Harrison Tool and take his production line to Puerto Rico. We get to buy a house there and live like local royalty. He wants to make me a queen, like Helen."

Neal reached across the table, took both of Katherine's hands and folded them between his own. "Come with me. I want to show you what that means."

Katherine stood up, still resting her hand in his and they moved toward the door.

"Thanks. I thought you would know. Where are we going?"

"I want to show you the corpse. We can go in my truck."

Katherine put on her coat and grabbed her purse before they hurried out the door toward the parking lot. She stepped up into his large black truck and pulled the seat belt across her lap. She was surprised how high off the ground she felt. She still wasn't sure where Neal wanted to take her, but right now it didn't matter. Katherine had just blurted out the truth, after Stephen had specifically asked her not to. She had become a traitor to that thing called family.

They drove to the edge of the old industrial park. New factories hadn't been built at this location in over twenty-five years. There were problems with drainage and the E.P.A. had put a stop to further development in the area. Neal parked the truck at the delivery entrance of the vacated Harrison Tool factory. He pulled a key from his jacket pocket and held open the gray metal door for Katherine to enter.

She was astounded by the size of the vacant space before her. Dead electrical lines formed hundreds of tentacles hanging from the bare steel-beamed ceiling. It was difficult to tell the exact color of the paint fading into the walls. Was it once blue or light green or had it become dirty white? Grimy dust coated all the exposed surfaces. There were so many surfaces and so little equipment to indicate that anything had ever been produced here. Katherine remembered visits to Stephen's plant, and she had always been amazed at the noise and smell and sheer presence of the dark machines, pounding and grinding and spitting out metal forms to be shaped and molded and sold at a profit. Production had seemed noisy and confusing and dramatic. Now before her, she saw the corpse. Nothing lived here, except rats and birds and large families of summer bugs. Old papers randomly brushed the corners of the floor as odd breezes lifted the air in the vast space.

Katherine shuttered at the loss of energy expressed graphically before her. She listened for shouting voices that no longer worked here. She looked for the weary expressionless faces of the last fifteen minutes of a graveyard shift. She sought to smell the mix of sweat and oil and dust and lunch boxes that permeates a living factory. Katherine looked over at Neal and saw him searching the same air with his nose and ears and eyes and skin. They walked into the corpse and said nothing. Streaks of light shot at them from the celestial windows lining the huge room. The sky outside and above was a wonderful light blue. Spring arrived confidently, not knowing the death within. Neal quickened his step to get ahead of Katherine. He walked to a metal stairway at the far end of the building and motioned for her to follow him upstairs. She could see a bank of windows on the large landing, where supervisors had watched machines and workers below. She moved toward the windows.

Neal waited in front of the last door on the landing. He had pushed it open and was inviting her to enter. Before doing so, she turned to look at the scene below her. It looked even more desolate and forsaken from this angle. Dust, highlighted in sunlit streaks, drifted down upon the cracked cement floor to form the black silt that covered the entire space. Katherine sighed and stepped into the room Neal had led her to. When she got inside, she saw that it had once been the nurse's station. To her left, an old enamel sink clung to the chipped cement-block wall. There must have been a mirror above it once, since the paint was much brighter in a large rectangle above the sink. A white-painted wooden cabinet was attached to the floor opposite the sink. The tattered appearance of the room matched perfectly the desolate, cavernous expanse just outside. Directly across from the door was the skeletal frame of an old iron bed. There was no longer a mattress to soften its edges, and the springs added another geometrical pattern to the cubicle space. The aging metal grid stood firm and ambitious against the deterioration of the room.

Those twisted wires clung to life as the life of the factory continued to collapse

around them. Neal and Katherine understood at the same moment that such regard for life as the springs displayed could find release through them. The two of them walked silently to the bed together. Katherine removed her soft camel coat and spread it gently across the stark metal frame. Neal removed his nylon jacket and rolled it into a tight ball, placing it along the collar of Katherine's coat. She looked at him without speaking, and they kissed instinctively. She had forgotten the joy to be found in an eager tongue. She pushed her hips into his and as they fell gently toward the hard surface of the makeshift bed, Katherine pulled at his shirt to release the buttons until she could feel the texture of his skin. She left small kisses on the dark hair that ran down the center of his chest as she tugged his leather belt to release the buckle. It had been years since she groped at a man with the excitement generated by a first encounter. She couldn't imagine that such basic physical yearnings could still exist within her. She felt herself go limp for a moment as she experienced a sudden orgasm. Her body arched as a whispering wave engulfed her. She couldn't think or comprehend anything but the wave. She quit trying and rolled into it. She clumsily pulled at her pantyhose to roll them down her shaking thighs. Neal helped her and they fumbled over each other's hands in awkward anticipation. He pulled. She squirmed. And then she laughed out loud. Neal eased into her as she pushed her bare heels into his lower back. His deep kiss perfectly matched his entry, as she let out a small delighted yell that only the corpse outside heard. Then, they moved together in a rhythm that was natural and smooth. He wanted to go on forever, but the moment was too powerful. He came with an explosion of warmth inside her, then they released into sighs and sweat and the creaking sounds of the bare wires beneath them.

They lay together for a ten-minute eternity before either one spoke. Finally, Katherine laughed a deep rich tone and stroked Neal's hair with her fingers. "I told you I knew you could explain things to me."

Neal drew imaginary lines on her face with his fingertips and smiled at her.

"What did I explain? We haven't said much of anything since we got here."

"Thanks for noticing. You have excellent body language. You explained loss and life and reality. As Helen would say, things are what they are."

"She is the queen, after all. Except now, I don't know. You're pretty royal. After what just happened, you've acquired another loyal subject. Has anyone ever told you that you have a beautiful body?"

Katherine blushed. "Years ago, before the children and gravity and certain scars. I appreciate the compliment, though. I must admit I feel ageless right now. You were wonderful to me, but I'm not sure what it means. This isn't something I do."

"I know. Me either. I mean, it isn't like I couldn't find it if I wanted to. With all the people I know, I have plenty of opportunities, but I haven't been too interested since Gretchen died. I always felt like I would be somehow disloyal to her memory if I made love to someone else. Pretty silly, huh?"

"No. I find it charming. Maybe this was part of your grief process. I'm happy to have counseled you in this way. I may not be as happy once I take time to think about this, but right now I feel perfectly delighted. Thank you."

Neal laughed and rolled over to kiss Katherine and glide his hands down the round surface of her breasts. "Thank you, too. I like being your intimate friend, but I don't want a professional relationship with you. Counseling isn't what I'm after. I just want access to your smooth skin and perfect mouth and long legs."

"Good answer. My skin and mouth and legs are pleased to be here for you."

They held each other in a full-body embrace and closed their eyes without speaking again for a few minutes. Then Neal broke the sweet silence. "I think we need to go back now. We left your car at the Smiling Seniors, and people may begin to wonder what happened to us."

"How odd. I wonder the very same thing. I'll have a lot to digest when I get home - including this amazing building. What do they plan to do with the place? Does Harrison still own the property?"

Neal smiled and kissed her forehead. "Funny you should ask me that. I told you I dabble in real estate. You just made love to the owner of the corpse."

Katherine sat up and looked at him with new respect for his complexity. "So, Mr. Land Baron, what do you plan to do with it?"

"I haven't decided. With the E.P.A. restrictions and the high costs of labor in Wisconsin, there haven't been a lot of interested companies. I'm investigating some other options. But I think part of the reason I decided to buy it was my own sentimental attachment to it. I could almost see the ghosts of workers who passed through here over the years. That's not a good investment strategy but who knows, something may come of it yet."

"Something came of it today. And here I thought you had a key because you were hired to maintain the property. It's hard to stay ahead of you. Do you ever sleep?"

Neal wrapped both arms around Katherine and rested his head on her shoulder.

"Sure. Sometimes I even nap in the middle of the day. Maybe I could call you to join me sometime to prove it to you."

"I'll let you know. But we probably need to get back. By the way, thanks again.

I feel about 20 years younger than I did this morning." She took his face in her hands and kissed him one last time before they dressed.

Amy was waiting at the house when Katherine returned. Finals week at the university was rapidly approaching, and Amy wanted the quiet atmosphere of home to prepare herself for the ordeal. She had decided to spend the weekend in Winterborne and catch up on some reading. Amy noticed that her mother seemed oddly distracted.

"So Mom, have you talked to Dad lately? How are things going for him in Chicago?"

Katherine had hoped to have time alone to sort out her feelings and understand

what had happened that afternoon. "Things are fine with Dad. In fact, he's considering a partnership of some kind with this client. I met Paul and Jane Foster when I visited Chicago. I like them a lot and I think we'll be seeing them often."

"That's good. It's nice to hear that you're expanding your horizons and meeting some new people. I know life can get pretty routine here in good old Winterborne. Maybe you should get out of the country, like me, this summer. You can even tag along to Spain, if you want."

Katherine walked across the kitchen and hugged Amy. "Thanks for the offer. Not many daughters would invite their mothers along on such an exotic adventure. I'll have to say 'no' this time, though. There's a lot going on and I don't think I'll be able to get away."

"Well, I meant it. You can be pretty good company - I mean, for someone your age and all."

Katherine laughed, "Thanks for the compliment, I think. Are you hungry? There isn't much in the house, but we could go out for something. Do you want to cook or grab a burger?"

Amy perked up at the thought of home cooking. "I eat a lot of carry-out, Mom. Could we go to the grocery store and get stuff to make your famous pasta surprise, with fresh tomatoes and lots of mushrooms?"

"Sure. We can go right now and have it ready by 7:00. I haven't made that in months, probably since Christmas break, in fact. We'll make a huge pile and have some for lunch tomorrow."

Neal called Katherine at 11:30 and Amy answered the phone. Amy asked him to wait a minute and she knocked on her mother's bedroom door. "Mom, there's some man named Neal on the phone for you. Do you want to talk to him this late?"

Katherine had just finished her bath and was ready to finally climb into the comfort and solitude of her warm bed. She called through the closed door. "Sure honey, I'll talk to him. I've been doing some business with him today. Thanks."

She picked up the phone and pretended to be surprised by his call, in case Amy was still on the line. "Neal, did you get an answer for me so quickly? I thought it would take you several days, at least."

"She hung up, Katherine. Sorry, I didn't know Amy was home."

"She surprised me this afternoon. She's here for the weekend. Stephen should be home by early evening tomorrow. It will be a nice family gathering."

"You don't sound pleased with the company."

Katherine sighed. "Well it's not exactly what I need after what happened today. I still can hardly believe it's true. Is that why you called? Are you as disoriented as I am?"

"Disoriented. Let me think. No, that's not what I am. I am relaxed and happy for the first time in a long time. I called to say good-night to you and to tell you I'd like to meet with you again. Is that the right term, I mean, 'meet with you'? Was it a meeting?"

Katherine couldn't help herself. She started to laugh at that description of their sudden passion. "I guess you could call it that, although I wouldn't have been quite so official. I don't know, Neal. I really haven't had a minute to think it through. It felt good to me, too, but it also felt uncomfortable. I don't know if I can do it again. You were fine, very fine in fact. So, don't get me wrong about that. But I need to sort some things out first. This is all so new."

"O.K. I won't push you. I just want you to know that I'm thinking of you - and what I'm thinking is good. Amy may wonder if we talk much longer, so I'll just say good-bye for now and wait to hear from you. Have a good weekend and I'll talk to you soon. Good-night."

"Good-night Neal, and I appreciate the call. It was good to hear your voice."

"Why, yes, it is. It's good to feel appreciated. And it was so spontaneous. I'll pass right now on the neck rub and paper. But I would love to tell both of you about my week. Of course, Katherine knows most of this already, but that project in Puerto Rico is really starting to come together."

Amy perked up at the sound of exotic Puerto Rico. She always dreamed of warm places and bright sunshine. She had never lived her life in Wisconsin or anywhere else where snow fell. "What project? Mom, you didn't say anything about Puerto Rico."

What does it have to do with us? You've always traveled a lot on business, but it didn't

Stephen was very excited to see Amy's car in the drive when he arrived home Friday evening. He knew she would like the idea of visiting Puerto Rico several times a year. Amy would also like the notion of robotics technology. She was always accusing him of being stodgy and set in his ways. This would prove to her that her father could be on the cutting edge, at least for Winterborne.

Amy and Katherine were in the kitchen together, laughing and talking and putting the finishing touches on the vegetable salad they had just prepared. Stephen kissed each of them 'Hello' and asked if there was anything he could do to help.

Amy cheerily responded as she handed him a fresh glass of iced tea. "Thanks for asking, Dad. We had hoped you would make it here in time to grill the steaks outside. Now that the weather is finally warming up, it will feel like a normal summer weekend with you at the grill. The steaks are all prepared and waiting in the fridge. Mom and I thought of everything."

Stephen shook his head in mock disbelief. "Is that all I'm good for around here? No one has asked me how my week went or offered to rub my tired neck or brought me the evening paper. What kind of household is this?"

Amy threw her arms around her father's shoulders and laughed with him. "O.K. Daddy Breadwinner. How was your week? Could I rub your neck? Have you seen the paper yet? How did I do - is that better?"

"Why, yes, it is. It's good to feel appreciated. And it was so spontaneous. I'll pass right now on the neck rub and paper. But I would love to tell both of you about my week. Of course, Katherine knows most of this already, but that project in Puerto Rico is really starting to come together."

Amy perked up at the sound of exotic Puerto Rico. She always dreamed of warm places and bright sunshine. She had no plans to spend her life in Wisconsin or anywhere else where snow fell. "What project? Mom, you didn't say anything about Puerto Rico. What does it have to do with us? You've always traveled a lot on business, but it didn't make much difference to those you left behind."

"You won't be left behind this time. I'm working out a partnership with Paul Foster. We're going to move the Winterborne production lines to Puerto Rico."

"What? You mean we are moving there for good?"

"No, Honey, slow down and listen."

"O.K., Dad. I'll close my mouth and open my ears, just like when I was little."

"Thanks, Amy, I appreciate that. What we're doing isn't as radical as a complete change of location. I know you have lots of friends here in town, and so do we. We'll still have this house and we'll live here part of the year, probably close to half. But with the other factory functioning in Puerto Rico, I'll need to be there as well. I already have a good plant manager here in Winterborne, and I'm hoping he will be willing to move to Puerto Rico. I would feel really confident in the success of this plan if he agrees to do that for me. Of course, I'll increase his salary considerably and that should help him decide. He'll be able to live very well there on what he'll be earning."

Katherine went to the refrigerator for more tea. "I didn't mention it Amy, because when I saw your father earlier in the week, it was still just an idea. I didn't know that more had happened since then. So, this part is news to me, too. You're really going through with it, huh?"

"Yes, Katherine. I thought you understood that the other night, but since you left

early, you didn't hear the rest of our discussion. We have put out requests for quotes on the actual cost of transporting equipment and supplies from Winterborne to Puerto Rico, and Paul is coming next week to work out some specs for installation of robotics here in the plant. He's bringing Jane, so I hope you can find something interesting to keep the two of you busy."

"Are they staying here, in the house, I mean? I'll need to air out the guest room this weekend if they are."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention that. I told them they could stay here. I hope that's not a problem."

Katherine covered the salad with plastic wrap and put it in the refrigerator. "No, that's not a problem at all. I'll just go to the grocery store and stock up on some things. With you gone so much, I haven't been buying much food. I'm excited about seeing Jane again. It should be lots of fun."

Amy wanted to hear more about Puerto Rico. "Dad, what do you mean, robotics? And moving the production line? I'm not following this."

"Oh sorry, I drifted into another thought there, Honey. Paul Foster has experience in his own business with automated production systems. That deal we were working on seemed perfect for that model, so we started discussing possibilities for using it effectively. You would have enjoyed those conversations, Amy. He had pictures and graphs and samples of the finished goods to demonstrate how the whole thing works. Very hands-on kind of guy."

Amy laughed. "Dad, I'm not a little girl any more. I really don't need toys to make me understand a concept. But, you're right. I think it would be cool to see a machine produce a machine. Is he going to bring one with him?"

"Gee, I don't know. I suppose I could call him and ask him to bring something along to show you. Are you planning to be in town any time next week?"

"For that, I'll make a special trip. Besides, if you are going to be partners and all

that, I should at least meet him."

Katherine spoke up. "Amy, didn't you say that you were studying this weekend for finals. Are you sure you have time available to socialize?"

"Oh Mom, it's just one night. I won't flunk anything because I don't study just once. Sometimes you are much too serious about things. Maybe you should find a frivolous hobby of some kind. I could give you some ideas."

"Thanks, Amy. I'll keep that in mind if I find myself becoming as stodgy as your father."

Stephen laughed at that comment and left the kitchen to change his clothes before cooking the steaks.

Saturday morning, Katherine told Stephen and Amy that she was going out to buy groceries and not to expect her for a couple of hours. Then she drove to the Smiling Seniors Complex to see if Neal was home. When she arrived, he was in front of the building, raking a shaded area where he planned to spread some grass seed. He waved at her and gathered his equipment as he walked toward the front door. She got out of her car and joined him on the sidewalk. They smiled and chatted casually as they made their way to his apartment. Once inside the door, they embraced one another and didn't say anything for a few soothing minutes.

Then Katherine pulled away and moved across the small living room to sit down on the familiar couch. "I can't stay long, but I wanted to let you know that I have Amy home all weekend, as well as Stephen, and next week we'll have house guests. Stephen is staying in town and his new partner, Paul Foster, is bringing his wife for a visit. I guess this will happen more and more now that the factory is being converted."

Neal eased himself down to a place beside her and took her hand. "Thanks for the warning. I may have called late at night and encountered the opportunity to introduce

myself to Stephen. You know, you haven't really explained much about this plan to automate production at his company. Do you have any time now to fill me in a little?"

"No, I'm sorry. I don't know much more than I told you already. The contracts he has now will be honored and he'll continue to serve his old customers. He just won't produce anything in Winterborne. He'll ship everything from Puerto Rico. And he'll save a small fortune in labor costs. I know he'll pay the workers less there, but I also know that the taxes he pays for supporting those employees will also be much less. It's a smart business decision. But I'm not comfortable with what it does to people who have worked for him for years. We'll keep the house here and our old friends, but I'll have to meet his former employees in the grocery store and the movie theater and church. I don't know how that will make me feel."

Neal kissed her fingertips. "It will make you feel guilty for awhile. But it will wear off. You'll believe that things are working out for them as time passes, and you'll decide that nothing in life is guaranteed. You'll adapt."

Katherine was surprised at this apparent cynicism. "That sounds a little cold, coming from you. Is that how it really works?"

"Sure, Katherine. It's true, you know. You'll get busy with the new routines in your life and you'll begin to look forward to your months in Puerto Rico. It's good to be queen. You were right about that. You and Stephen could move easily into retirement in a few years, playing golf and sailing and skipping off to Europe. Problems with employment in Winterborne will be a distant memory."

"I'm sorry, Neal, but that still seems a little uncaring. I think you're really describing a vision of your own future, as well as mine. Aren't you also making plans to move on and leave Winterborne problems behind? Aren't you trying to find ways to break with the memories of your life in this place?"

"You pick up my signals pretty well. Our excursion to the Harrison plant opened some new horizons for me and it's all your fault. Thank you. You made me feel alive"

and excited about possibilities I hadn't noticed for a long time. I returned some phone calls yesterday to people who were interested in the property, and I may have a real lead. But enough of these visions and plans. I'm more interested in the next few days. Could I see you again, after your house clears of all those people? I'd really like that."

Katherine leaned against him and kissed him gently. "Yes, I would like nothing more. I'll call when I'm free again, but I must go now. I'm at the supermarket, you know."

"Your house is lovely, just what I expected of you. Did you have it built or were you lucky enough to find it already here?" Jane Foster had just been given the standard tour of the house and yard. Katherine had nearly memorized a canned speech for showing off her residence to new visitors. She had lived in the house for nearly twenty years and knew every quirky corner of its space. She loved her home. Stephen had very little input in household decisions, but he seemed proud of Katherine's taste and her attention to details. He often bragged to friends that he had more than just a wife, he truly had a domestic engineer.

"We stumbled upon it the first week we were here. It had been an entry in a builder's Parade of Homes, so the decorator was a professional. That helped immensely. I didn't have to imagine how good I could make it look. It looked perfect when I first encountered it. I just changed some colors and some landscaping to make it my own. I'm glad you like it. We've been very happy here."

"I guess I know now why Chicago is only a vacation destination for you. This is truly a home." Jane walked back upstairs ahead of Katherine, so they could talk while Jane unpacked her bags.

"But Jane, it must be wonderful living in Chicago. I envy your choice of restaurants and entertainment and the sheer energy of it all. You have no idea how quiet

it can get here."

Jane laughed as she opened her bedroom door. "Do you know how much we sound like that old children's book? What was it called? Oh yes, 'City Mouse and Country Mouse'. Do you think anybody's truly happy where they are?"

Katherine had to admit that discontent seemed easy to achieve. "Well, I am happy right here most of the time. Maybe that's what vacations are all about. It makes me think that this Puerto Rico thing could solve the problem. I could live here and there and stop by in Chicago for my urban stimulation. I'll keep my Day Planner with me at all times, for sure."

Jane filled the closet with an array of spring dresses. She had over-packed, as usual, but they had plenty of room in the car for extra luggage and she wanted to be prepared for whatever event was planned. She and Paul had never had children, so Jane had spent her adult life planning and actually having free time. She knew the schedules of all the theater productions in the Chicago area and was proud of her accomplishments on suburban golf courses. Katherine admired her easy attitudes toward life in general, and was looking forward to being her friend.

"Is there a health club or gymnasium in the area, where I could work out? I've begun a personal program, using free weights and walking. I'd rather not get behind while I'm here."

Jane made Katherine feel a little guilty about her own slack attitude toward exercise lately. "Sure, you can use the YMCA as a guest on our membership. Since the girls left home, the YMCA crowd doesn't see much of me any more, so it will be a good reason for me to get over there, too."

"Thanks. I've tried to get Paul to start something like that for himself, but so far he's not interested. I hope it doesn't take a heart attack for him to make the decision."

"I know what you mean. Stephen exercises every day, but he always has an excuse for not eating like he should. I do what I can here at home, but he's away so

much and I have no idea what choices he's making. But then I try to remember that I'm not his mother, after all."

They laughed and walked back downstairs for a last cup of coffee, while they made plans for the day.

Sheila noticed that Helen had not needed to wear an overcoat now for several days. It was the third week of April and spring had finally arrived in Wisconsin. Helen sat in her usual place and watched people walk by on the street outside. She chewed slowly and deliberately, as the English muffin became a memory. Sheila wondered what Helen's niece, Ann, wanted to see her about. Ann had called Sheila and made arrangements to come in at 10:30, just after Helen left. Sheila supposed it had to do with the money that Helen paid her every month. She had pulled out the file she kept of receipts and phone bills and balances due from Helen. She just wasn't sure she needed to tell Ann any of it. It seemed pretty nosy to her.

Ann must have been watching the restaurant from somewhere, because she came in just after Helen left. She looked very confident in her olive twill suit and crisp white shirt. She smiled at Sheila and put out her hand. "Hello, Sheila, I hope your day is going well. May I sit here with you for a few minutes? I would like to talk to you about Helen, if I could."

"Sure. This is the quiet before the noon storm, so I have a little time. Can I get you a cup of coffee? I'm gonna have one and I won't even charge you for it. My treat."

Ann sat at the small table where Sheila had directed her. "Why, yes. That's very generous of you. I drink mine black, thank you."

Sheila came back with two full steaming mugs and took a deep breath as she sat down. "So, what can I do for you?"

Ann looked down at the gray table surface and tried to form her question in

exactly the right way. "I know that you help Helen quite a bit with things. As her niece and closest living relative, I want you to understand how much I appreciate it. She's quite independent you realize, and sometimes her family worries about her."

"Thank you, Ma'am. I do it because Helen and I are friends. She's been coming here every day for years and I've gotten to know some of her ways."

"I guess it's those 'ways' that we need to look into. I am so happy the weather is getting better again. I worry every day of winter that I shall receive a call, telling me she has fallen or frozen or been hit by a car while crossing a street."

Sheila nodded in agreement and swallowed some coffee. "I really understand how you feel. There are some days, when it's snowing or blowing and she's running late, that I stand by that window and just wait for her to turn the corner onto Main Street. You aren't the only one who wishes she would just stay home sometimes. You should hear what some of the customers say about it."

Ann perked up. "Oh, really? Is there a lot of talk about her?"

"Oh, sure. Most people, even if they don't know who she is, know the crazy old walking lady."

"Is that what they call her?"

Sheila worried that she had overstated the situation and tried to soften it a bit.

"Well, not everybody, for sure. But some do. But then, they're usually the ones that got nothing better to do than call people names. I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. It doesn't happen much, really."

Ann looked across the nearly empty room toward the window, where Helen sat most mornings. "People outside on the street see her sitting there too, don't they? Does she ever make faces or say things to people who walk by?"

Sheila knew that Ann must have heard something about Helen's occasional outbursts. "Well I guess she does, sometimes. But she really doesn't mean anything by it. It's almost like she's talking out loud to herself, you know. We're all pretty used to it."

It's harmless enough."

"But, she does do it. Can you share with me some of the comments she makes?"

Sheila was suddenly very uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking. "Oh, sometimes she'll laugh at a person's sour expression or silly hat. You know, like Gus Weaver. He wears that old farmer hat of his with the brim flipped up. She almost always laughs out loud when he comes in. The regulars know it's all in fun and Gus just shakes his head, but I guess sometimes she calls out to him across the room and tells him he looks like a silly hick. If you aren't expecting it, it probably seems a little weird. I've had strangers ask about it."

"What do you tell them?"

"Oh, just that Gus knows Helen likes to tease him and it isn't as bad as it sounds. Most people just smile about it, but some say she's a nuisance to have out in public. I guess they're worried about being her next target. And some of them would deserve it, if you know what I mean."

Ann was suddenly deep in thought. "Has she ever actually attacked anyone? Physically, I mean."

"Well . . . None that would count."

"What does that mean?"

Sheila got up to freshen their coffee and think about how to answer that question. She came back and sat down and waited a moment before going on. "Well about two months ago, an ice fisherman came in after being on the lake all morning. He was bundled up, you know, like you almost couldn't see his face for all his cold weather gear. Helen was just walking out the door for home and he sort of bumped into her. I know he didn't see her, but it made her mad. She started calling him some awful names and told him to watch where he was going and before I could get there to settle her down, she wopped him with her cane, right on the top of his head. Of course he was wearing a knit hat under a wool hood, so he hardly felt it, but a couple of people jumped up to grab

Helen, to keep her from wopping him again. She just started muttering under her breath and wiggled free. Then she walked out the door and left the man behind, shaking his head and walking to the counter back there. The whole thing only lasted two minutes or so and nobody got hurt."

Ann leaned across the table eagerly. "Do you know this fisherman's name? Does he live around here?"

Sheila was even more uncomfortable than before. She wished Ann would ask about money, instead of this stuff. "No. He's not a regular customer. He only comes over to ice fish, but I think he's a friend of Jerry Vogel's. You know, the Vogels over by Rock Lake. I think that's where they fish."

"Jerry Vogel. Sure. I know Jerry and his wife. I'll just give him a call. Do you remember if Jerry was here that day?"

"No. Like I said, the guy came in by himself. I don't know where Jerry was. Is that all you need to ask me about - cause I really should start working on lunch now."

Ann reached for her purse as she rose from the table. "Thank you, Sheila. You have been a great help to me this morning. I also want to thank you for being such a help to my aunt. I'm sure I'll be talking to you again soon and the coffee was delicious."

Sheila watched Ann leave the restaurant. There was an obvious family resemblance between Ann and Helen, but Sheila felt more comfortable being around Helen, in spite of her cantankerous moods. She put Helen's records back in the drawer and washed her hands before mixing the potato salad she was making for the lunch special.

Neal was washing his truck in the parking lot as Helen approached the building. She was still muttering to herself under her breath. She had been doing so ever since she left the Black Forest. She was wondering what Ann was doing, going into the cafe just

after she herself had left. She had watched Ann pretending to look in shop windows up and down the street. Then she watched as Ann went into the hardware store and came out with no packages. It looked to Helen like Ann was waiting for someone and just killing time. It wasn't until Helen left for home that she realized Ann was waiting to go into the Black Forest. Helen had paused at the corner and looked back, just in time to see Ann make a beeline for the restaurant. Helen had considered turning around and joining Ann inside, but decided against it. Let her niece snoop around. She never could mind her own business and confronting her wouldn't change it. So instead, Helen muttered to herself all the way home.

Neal dropped his big soft brush into a bucket and dried his hands on his pants as he walked over to Helen. "Hi there, Queen E. Beautiful spring day, huh? I wondered, since I have the gear out and all, if you'd like me to wash the old Ford. I know it didn't really get out much this winter, but a good shine never hurt. I can even take you for a ride in her later, if you like. What do you say? Is it a date?"

Helen smiled broadly and shook her head at him. "You sure do keep yourself busy. I'd like it very much if I could take a ride today. And of course I would expect you to clean it up first. Poor old dusty thing. I'll eat and take a little nap and meet you here later. You still have the keys, don't you?"

"Gee, Helen, I don't know if I do. I seem to remember giving them to the paperboy for a joy ride last week. I'll track him down. I sure hope he left us some gas."

Helen began laughing and walked toward the front door. "Just tell him he can't use the my car for parking with his girlfriend."

Neal also laughed and walked across the lot to finish his truck.

Leslie waved Ann in and invited her to sit down. "I'm glad you caught me. I was getting ready to head home, but there's no hurry. What did Sheila tell you?"

Late in the afternoon on this warm April day, Leslie Logan watched from her office window as Helen and Neal left in Helen's old car. She didn't exactly approve of

Helen storing her vehicle in a space that could be used by someone who actually drove a car, but there wasn't much she could do about it. The parking space came with the apartment. But tenants complained about Helen's use of the privilege. There were couples living at the Smiling Seniors complex who had two cars and they were allowed the use of only one sheltered space. They didn't think it was fair that Helen could take a space that they could be using themselves. The topic routinely came up at monthly tenant meetings. So far, the original regulation stood. Actually there wasn't much the local board could do, since it was part of the federal code for public housing for apartments of this type. But Leslie had developed a waiting list for vacancies when they occurred. She wondered if she would have a new vacancy after Helen's court date next month and if the next tenant in Helen's apartment would own a car.

Leslie returned to her desk to read the letter she had received today from Neal. He had given her notice that he would continue his job until July 1. That should give her and the board enough time to find his replacement. He thanked her for the opportunity to be employed by the Housing Authority and offered to train the person they hired. Leslie was not surprised by his letter. She was more surprised that he stayed as long as he did. His work was excellent and the tenants liked having him around, but Leslie often found him annoying and a little arrogant. However, she worried that the next person she hired could have worse traits than his. She sighed and called the local newspaper to begin running a help-wanted ad.

Ann knocked on the office door as Leslie hung up the phone. "Leslie, do you have a minute? I went by the Black Forest this morning and talked to that waitress. I think I have some information that may help us."

Leslie waved Ann in and invited her to sit down. "I'm glad you caught me. I was getting ready to head home, but there's no hurry. What did Sheila tell you?"

Ann took an excited deep breath and talked rapidly. "Helen actually struck someone with her cane, and right in that public place. There were several witnesses and I

got the name of the person she hit. He lives down in Illinois, but he comes here to go ice fishing every winter. I called him, but he wasn't home. I left a message on his machine and I hope he calls me at home tonight. Did you say that she hit somebody here once, too?"

"Well that's the story I heard, but nobody saw it happen."

"Can we talk to that person? It would be wonderful to have a couple of samples to bring to court."

Leslie paused for a moment and then answered. "I'm not sure I want to have the story presented in a court room. I should have filed a complaint with the local police, according to HUD regulations, but I failed to do that. The person she hit didn't want to talk to the police, so we let it go. It hasn't happened again, although Helen does shake her cane at people often enough. Can we just pass on this story?"

Ann straightened in her chair. "I don't think so, Leslie. Not on a matter this important. I have an attorney who can either subpoena the information, in spite of your objections, or represent you in your situation with HUD, if it ever goes that far."

The threat was not even slightly veiled, so Leslie chose the option of cooperating fully. "I'll call Phyllis to see if she's home. Can I get you a Coke or something? I'm thirsty, myself."

Ann relaxed and sat back in her seat. "A Diet Coke would taste good to me. Thank you."

Phyllis Heinz welcomed them into her well-kept apartment. The space smelled of cinnamon and roast beef and violet water. Phyllis wore a cotton floral dress with a small lace collar. She had plans to go out to eat supper at Bob Evans with a group of friends. She had told Leslie to come by for half an hour or so before she left.

Ann and Leslie were seated on the overstuffed plaid couch that lined the wall

under the long window in the living room. Phyllis sat in her gold recliner, beside which she had left a sewing basket and some embroidery she'd been working on.

Phyllis spoke first. "You said you wanted to talk to me about Helen. I guess you mean that time when she hit me. But that's been awhile. Why are you asking me about it now?"

Leslie threw a glance at Ann before answering. "Well maybe you haven't heard, but there is going to be a court hearing next month. Judge Mitchell will determine if Ann should become a legal guardian for her Aunt Helen."

"Oh, I think I did hear something about that. I just forgot, I guess, but I still don't understand what that has to do with me."

Ann took the opportunity to explain to Phyllis how it was related to her experience with Helen. "Part of what the judge wants to know, Phyllis, is whether or not Helen makes good decisions on her own behalf. Now, if someone strikes another person for no apparent reason, then that doesn't seem like a good decision, does it?"

Phyllis shook her head in agreement. "No. You're right about that. I remember it seemed a little crazy when it happened."

Ann responded immediately. "What, exactly, was 'it' that happened? I understand that the two of you were alone at the time."

Phyllis started to wring her hands as she remembered that day in December. "I had just come back from doing some Christmas shopping for my grandchildren. It was a beautiful sunny day and the snow was fresh and sparkling. All the world seemed ready for the holiday. Except Helen, of course. She doesn't put up a tree or send cards or even attend a church service."

Leslie stepped in. "We know that Helen has her own ways about things, but what happened when you saw her that day?"

"Oh, like I said, I was carrying some packages and juggling my purse to find my keys, when Helen came walking down the hall toward me. She was muttering about

something that I didn't understand, and we sort of bumped into each other. I apologized, but she got really mad. She asked me if I was blind or something, that I hadn't seen her coming. I told her that I sort of lost my balance and she started to laugh at me. She called me a 'giggly old fool' and started walking away."

Ann broke in. "But I thought she hit you with her cane. You just said she only called you names."

Phyllis barked back. "She did hit me. Please let me finish."

"I'm sorry. Please go on."

Phyllis took a deep breath before continuing. "Well, I thought that was the end of it, too. Then I realized I had dropped one of my packages down the hall. It was wrapped in bright red paper and had a big white bow. You know Sheffield's Department Store in Madison, how pretty they wrap things. Well, Helen was walking right towards it and I was afraid it might trip her, so I hurried back to retrieve it before she got there."

"So she hit you as you passed her?" Leslie was trying to keep up with the story.

"No, no, no. Helen didn't say anything at all when I walked by. It was when I bent over to pick it up that she hit me. Right on the head. She laughed about it, but I was so shocked it brought tears to my eyes."

Ann sat on the edge of the sofa as she listened to the details of the event. "So Aunt Helen maliciously attacked you right in the hall of the building?"

Phyllis sat back and looked at Ann. "Well, no ma'am. I don't think I would call it malicious. I mean, she was laughing, but it was because she thought I looked so funny all stooped over that way, trying to clear a path for her. I remember her saying something like 'thanks for clearing the way. Seems people leave all kinds of roadblocks for me'. Then she bopped me with her cane, like I was just a puppy or something. I'm not used to being bopped and laughed at. She's not very nice sometimes, but I don't think she meant to hurt me, if you know what I mean."

Leslie said quietly to Ann, "I guess you know now why I didn't call the police. I

doubt if Phyllis would have pressed charges."

Ann whispered back. "I understand, but assault is still assault and shouldn't be tolerated at any level. I'll see that my attorney hears this story."

Leslie stood up and walked over to Phyllis. She put out her hand to say good-bye as Ann walked to the door. "We won't take any more of your time today, Phyllis, but you may be hearing from us again on this matter. I hope you have a good time with your friends tonight at Bob Evans. I hear their senior menu has some really nice choices."

Phyllis stood up to walk them to the door. "Thank you for stopping by. I hope what I said helps you. I know most people only want what is best for Helen and it must be hard for her. I mean, I don't know what I would do at my age if I didn't have children and grandchildren around. I really feel sorry for her sometimes."

Jane looked stunning in her shimmering sequined dress. She had earned her tan in March when she spent three weeks on a Mediterranean Cruise. She had beautiful photographs of the trip and long funny stories to tell. Jane was always a welcome addition to a dinner party. Tonight, Katherine had called Ann to see if she and Ralph would join their foursome at the club. Ann had been happy to accept, since she had hoped to talk to Katherine again before the court date. The group was seated in front of a large window in the main dining room, overlooking the lush young green grass of the rolling golf course. Jane commented on the symmetry of the landscape and how well planned the course seemed to be. Ann was happy to report that her grandfather had hired the best designers in the country to come lay out the course and location for the clubhouse. At the time it was built, it had won several awards.

Jane was interested in the history of this quaint place. "So Ann, your family has been here for several generations, then?"

"Oh, yes. My great-grandfather was one of the founders of the town itself. His name appears on the corporate papers for its formation. In fact, there is a plaque on the south corner of the courthouse that includes all the founders' names as a permanent memory of them. My grandfather was just a little boy then, but he remembers the grand party that was held in celebration of Winterborne's birth. There were fireworks and everything."

"How wonderful. You must be very proud. Do all the descendants still live here or have you pretty much scattered, like so many families these days?"

Ann looked a little sad at the question and shook her head. "I'm afraid you're right about that. Only three family members remain in town to carry on the tradition started so long ago. I have a daughter, Rachael, who lives here with her husband. He is a physician and they have three sons. I am quite proud of her, but the actual family name ends there, I'm afraid. My Aunt Helen, who also lives in Winterborne, never married.

CHAPTER TEN

Jane looked stunning in her sheer turquoise floral dress. She had earned her tan in March, when she spent three weeks on a Mediterranean Cruise. She had beautiful photographs of the trip and long funny stories to tell. Jane was always a welcome addition to a dinner party. Tonight, Katherine had called Ann to see if she and Ralph would join their foursome at the club. Ann had been happy to accept, since she had hoped to talk to Katherine again before the court date. The group was seated in front of a large window in the main dining room, overlooking the lush young green grass of the rolling golf course. Jane commented on the symmetry of the landscape and how well planned the course seemed to be. Ann was happy to report that her grandfather had hired the best designers in the country to come lay out the course and location for the clubhouse. At the time it was built, it had won several awards.

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wander Ralph decided to add to the comments made by his wife. "Ann gets a bit blue when she thinks that her grandfather may fade into the great expanse of history. Some of us are doing what we can to provide a memorial of some kind. Perhaps a small public building or park or even one of the schools could carry the Grant name. I can be very political when need be, so I have great hope of succeeding. Would anyone mind if I ordered the wine this evening? I asked the manager of the club to bring in a new California line I discovered and I would like to introduce you to it."

Everyone agreed that they would be delighted to try his new brand and the conversation shifted to domestic versus imported wines. The group was moving on to dessert by the time Katherine changed the conversation back to Ann and her family.

the star "I haven't seen your Aunt Helen for a little while. Have you heard from her?"

yes to Ann looked perplexed. "Well, no. I don't hear directly from Helen, you know. But I have been keeping in touch with Leslie at the Smiling Seniors and I understand Helen is up to her usual tricks over there. Her and that buddy of hers, Neal."

white Katherine flushed a bit, but no one noticed. "Neal Parker? I know they get along, but why did you call him her 'buddy'?"

issue, a "Oh, I don't know. There's just something that seems too smug about him. He

knows everybody and he always looks like he could break into a laugh at any moment. I'm not sure he shows the proper respect, for a man in his position."

Katherine gave her an innocent, puzzled look. "How much do you know about his position? I mean, do you know his background or anything?"

"I know enough. He lost a job at Harrison's when they closed down and now he works as a janitor over there. Seems to lack initiative, if you ask me. I'm worried that he knows the Grant family history and thinks there may be some money around if he gets close to Helen. Stranger things have happened."

Katherine chuckled to herself and Stephen gave her a curious look. She tried to cover. "Oh, I'm sorry. I just thought of something else and my mind must have wandered. I guess I understand why you're trying to protect Helen from some gigolo."

Stephen coughed at that comment and changed the subject. "I understand that the local Indian tribe got approval from the state assembly to claim Winterborne, and most of the county, as tribal land. I guess they get an annual stipend from the state as compensation for developed property and they have the right to open gambling houses. I'm sure the gambling rights were what the tribe truly really wanted, since the land has been otherwise occupied for over a hundred years."

Ralph responded immediately. "Oh, yes. I've been directly involved in all of this for quite some time. I'm part of a local committee that lobbied against the state action. It was a bad year for us, though. Seems last summer a tribe got denied rights up north, so the state felt they owed them one. It just happened we were next on the list, so they said yes to the Missitamias. We have some other ways to stop them, though. You know they'll need real estate in the county to put up their casino and the law didn't give them any eminent domain. That means they'll have to buy or lease a spot, just like the rest of us white folks. My group has enough contacts in town to stop that."

Katherine was surprised at this news. She had not paid much attention to the issue, although it had often been in the local paper. "But gambling. I've read about

communities where the crime rate skyrockets and the local economy doesn't benefit much." "I'll see you then. I look forward to it," Katherine hung up the phone and started

for the Stephen added, "You're right about that part, Katherine, but with the Indians, the majority of the workers in the casinos are tribe members. The money they generate doesn't get back to town much at all. They take it most of it home to the Chief, or whoever."

Jane chirped in. "My, my. I had no idea what I was missing, living in uncomplicated Chicago. Up here, even in the rarefied air of Wisconsin, I hear about vice and corruption and politics. You people are beginning to make me homesick."

At that, everyone laughed and ordered cheesecake and coffee. Helen owned very few clothes, but Katherine could see they were of high quality. She wondered how old they were.

Helen asked Sheila if she could use the phone. Ever since seeing Ann skulking around a few days ago, Helen had been uneasy. She found the number she sought in the local directory and placed the call.

Katherine had just pushed the heavy-duty clean cycle on the dishwasher and was about to go upstairs and dress for the day. After a week of houseguests, it was comforting to settle back into her daily routines and enjoy the absolute quiet of this spring morning. The phone disturbed her comfort. She decided to answer it in the living room, where the sound of the washer wouldn't bother the conversation.

"Hello, is this Katherine Mitchell?"

Katherine didn't recognize the voice on the other end. "Yes, this is she. What can I do for you?"

"This is Helen Grant. I wondered if you could come see me later today."

Katherine took a short breath in surprise when she heard the name. "Why of course, Helen, I'll be happy to visit with you this morning. Do you want me to pick you up from the Black Forest?"

"Thank you. That would be very kind of you. I'll be waiting outside at 10:00."

"I'll see you then. I look forward to it." Katherine hung up the phone and started for the stairway. She paused for a moment to consider what might be on Helen's mind. Their last meeting had ended rather badly again, and she hadn't believed that Helen would ever seek her out. She became excited at the prospect of Helen opening up to her.

Helen was waiting outside the restaurant when Katherine arrived. She stood holding the jacket of her usual navy wool suit, but she now sported a short-sleeved white blouse with interesting soft stitching on the collar and sleeve edges. Helen owned very few clothes, but Katherine could see they were of high quality. She wondered how old they were.

Katherine walked around the car and opened the door for Helen, who waited patiently for her to do so. "Good morning, Helen. You look well today. How are things going for you?"

Helen nodded and smiled as she lowered herself onto the leather seat. "Things seem to be going fine and spring has been beautiful this year. I'll miss walking back on this clear day, but I'll be out again later."

The two women chatted about the weather and the food at the Black Forest and the flowers blooming all over town. When they arrived at the Smiling Seniors, a few people were coming and going in the parking lot, but Neal was not one of them. Katherine had hoped to get a chance to tell him that her guests had left this morning, as well as her husband. She would call Neal later unless he showed up somewhere before she left.

Once inside Helen's apartment, Katherine noticed a few changes had taken place. Instead of the stark countertop to greet them, a tea service had been laid out. A silver tray held a fine porcelain teapot and two matching cups. Helen asked Katherine to be seated

in the wicker chair, while she prepared tea for them.

Katherine watched Helen go through all the motions of the preparation. She could see that this was a habit of many years, in that Helen moved through each step with a quiet fluidity and grace. The old wrinkled hands didn't miss a beat as they lifted and poured and stirred and caressed the china. When she had finished, Katherine walked into the kitchen area and offered to carry the tray into the living room. Helen accepted her offer and the two ladies sat down to tea.

Helen spoke first. "This is very kind of you, Katherine. I'm afraid I treated you badly the last time we were together, but I promise to be more gentle with you today."

"No, really. You have been friendlier than I might be in a similar situation. I mean I am a stranger who stepped in and started asking all kinds of personal questions." Katherine sipped her tea and realized that it had a rich and unusual flavor.

"I hope you like the tea. It was one of my sister Alpha's favorites. She was able to enjoy tea with me daily, right up to the last, and having you here like this helps me remember her. We would sit in her parlor late in the afternoon and watch the day close as it moved into evening. Tea time is such a nice tradition. I wish more Americans enjoyed it."

Katherine watched as Helen seemed to relax into fond memories. "Is it something you learned in Boston?"

Helen smiled broadly. "Beatrice taught me. For all those thirty years we shared a house, she wouldn't let a day go by without tea. She paid attention to details in ways that didn't seem important to me. I was always in a hurry, always moving and doing and running late. Beatrice was far more able to enjoy the moment, you know, just exist in it. She planned our house so those moments were surrounded with beauty and order. Had I always lived alone, I would never have understood what that meant. She taught me to be more aware of things. I'll always love her for that."

The room fell silent for a time as the two women acknowledged the memory.

today. Katherine was interested in Helen's retrospective mood. "Was Beatrice also a teacher?"

Helen looked out the window at a bird that had landed on a small branch. "Oh yes, we both taught at the same school until they forced us to retire. However, my schedule was much fuller than hers because I was also an athletic coach. I'm sorry to say that most of what we did was intramural in those days, but I kept the girls very busy with soccer and tennis and swimming and track. It was great fun."

Like a light bulb coming on, Katherine suddenly understood Helen's walking.

"So you've always been physically active? I mean, you told me about your golf skills before and now you say you were involved in sports all your life. It sounds like you've never stopped moving, have you?"

Helen stretched her feet out on the floor in front of her. "These old legs wouldn't know what to do if they weren't on the go every day. I love the feel of action and energy. I can't stay cooped up for long - never could. I was once a very good skier."

"They have some excellent programs for seniors at the local YMCA. Have you ever looked into them?"

"Oh, those. I went over there one day, but it felt more like a social club than a gymnasium, with all those women gossiping and laughing and trying not to sweat. I didn't see a serious athletic endeavor anywhere. I turned around and walked back here."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. I can't believe there wasn't something there for you, but I'm sure your walking is keeping you fit."

"I like to think so and I enjoy how the scenery changes every day. I look forward to the sounds and the smells and the way the sidewalks feel under my feet. I know every bump and dip from here to the Black Forest." Helen looked out the window as though picturing the trip in her mind.

Katherine waited a few moments before she continued. She noticed several objects on the small desk that she hadn't seen before. "Have you been cleaning closets

today, Helen? What are those things on your desk?"

Helen turned in her chair and reached out to stroke what looked like a large old phone book. The corners of the cover were turned up and there were brown water stains meandering down the yellowed layers of pages. "I keep this to remind me of the great big world out there still. Sometimes it's hard to remember the noise and bustle of all those years back east. This is visible proof to me that such places thrive."

Katherine stood up and walked over to the desk. The volume was a 1973 Manhattan Telephone Directory. "May I look through it?"

Helen nodded and removed her hand to allow Katherine to pick it up. She took it back to her seat and rested it on her lap. The book was huge, more than three inches thick. As she lifted it open, she was suddenly struck with the sheer numbers of people listed in it. She had held Chicago phone books, so the size was not new to her, but she had never viewed one in this way. It had become an abstract symbol of complex urban existence and individual personal identity. It reminded Katherine of when she had first learned that snowflakes were different from one another. She had looked at drifts of snow in a new way. The huge sparkling white masses were amazing and beautiful, yet they were composed of millions of fragile intricate individual ice crystals.

Turning the pages, she asked, "Did you live in Manhattan? I thought you taught in Boston." "I did teach there, and I lived there until Beatrice died, then another friend invited me to come live with her in New York. By then most of the people I had worked with were retiring and moving away, so I decided to accept her offer. She had a two-bedroom apartment and a cleaning service. I enjoyed living there until Alpha needed me back here."

Katherine returned the phone book to its spot on the desk and noticed the other unusual object she had seen earlier. She picked up the stiff bristle brush with a worn wooden handle. "Is this a clothes brush? It looks very old. It's beautiful."

Helen smiled. "Oh, yes. It's very old indeed. It was a gift from my father. I've used it daily for more years than I can count. Wool suits like the ones I wear need a good brushing, you know. It keeps them tidy. I usually keep it in the top drawer of my dresser, but I thought you might enjoy seeing it."

Katherine ran her hand back and forth across the prickly surface of the brush. The bristles made a crackling sound as they sprung sharply back in place after each stroke. The wooden handle felt smooth and warm from sitting in the sunny window. Katherine placed it gently back on the desk and returned to her seat. "Why did you invite me here to see these things today?"

"Oh, I guess I wanted you to see that I'm not completely disconnected from the world. I have chosen to be a loner in my last years. I don't like everybody and I let it show, so I guess you could call me 'set in my ways'."

"But some people believe it's more than that and they are worried about you. You do take some risks that seem a little foolish for someone your age and I think you know that's true."

"Maybe I do, but I think it's my own business and they should stop trying to make it theirs."

Katherine sighed and freshened her tea. "I know what you're saying and I agree to a point, but you live with these people. Couldn't you try to be a little more civil? You say you've always had friends. Maybe you could try a little harder to fit in. Or would you like to go back east? Maybe I could help with that?"

Helen shook her head. "No, I wouldn't know what to go back to. My friend in New York died five years ago. I think I'll finish out my years here in Winterborne. I know that doesn't make Ann happy, but here I am."

"Can I ask why that doesn't make Ann happy? Last time I asked about Ann, you threw me out. Is there something I should know before I complete my report?"

"I really don't know how best to answer that. Ann worries about me, but not for

the reasons she gives you. She's afraid I'll do something in public or say something that will forever tarnish the revered Grant name. Has she mentioned her hallowed father to you, my brother Randolph?"

"Actually, she talks more about her grandfather and his prominence in the community at the time it was developed. She has endless stories about that."

Helen chuckled to herself. "I'm sure that's true. My brother Randolph was a dim light in the atmosphere of local affairs. He liked to travel and spend money and embarrass his wife with his public philandering. Ann had a difficult childhood, you know. She was the only child and had the misfortune of being a girl. My father was close to her, with Randolph gone so much of the time, so I'm sure she worships his memory. So much, in fact, that she will do anything to save his name for posterity."

"But that still doesn't explain the depth of your animosity. Is there something else?"

"Oh, just years of little annoyances and misunderstandings that most families experience. Except for Meredith, of course. She'll never approve of my sending any money to her. Alpha's granddaughter is not welcome in Ann's house. Meredith's father died in jail, you know. His name was Bob Franklin and he was a partner in a big Chicago accounting firm. He was also a thief. He was found stealing his client's money and when the scandal hit the local papers, Ann was mortified. Ann called Cora and told her that she and Meredith had better stay away from Winterborne forever. As far as I know, they have followed her order. I know it's been hard on Cora, but even harder on Meredith."

"But didn't you say that Ann's own father, Randolph, led a questionable life? Why was she so hard on Cora and Meredith? It was Bob Franklin who broke the law, after all, not his wife and child."

Helen shook her head. "That's not how Ann sees it. Her father Randolph's sins were all kept relatively private. The town knew of his shortcomings, but considered them part of what can happen to a rich man. Nothing shameful ever made it into the

newspapers. The Franklin scandal, however, generated press throughout Wisconsin. In many ways, Cora was smart not to come back. She was far more anonymous and able to continue her life in peace in Chicago. Ann still bristles at the mention of Bob Franklin's name. He was from Madison, so some local people know his family."

Katherine was still puzzled. "But that doesn't explain Ann's bitterness toward Meredith. She seems the most innocent in that whole scenario. I mean, how could she be blamed for any part of that old scandal, if that's what bothers Ann?"

"Oh, that's easy. She's projecting a 'like father like daughter' motive onto my sending Meredith money every month. Ann thinks Meredith is somehow stealing the money under false pretenses, and she wants to put a stop to it. If Ann can get her hands on my income, then she can stop the flow of cash to Meredith. She sees herself as my rescuer. I see her as a meddling troublemaker."

Katherine stood up and put her empty cup on the silver tray next to Helen's. "You have helped me a lot today, Helen. I'm going to write all of this down and include it in my report. I enjoyed your tea and your company. I hope we can do this again. I may have some more questions, once I think it through."

"I appreciate your coming on such short notice. It's just that I saw Ann following me yesterday and going into the Black Forest right after I left. She is very serious about this whole business and you seem to be my only resource. I'll try to be good between now and the court date. I know it's hard for me to hold my tongue sometimes, but I guess it's in my best interests."

Katherine glanced out the window and noticed Helen's car, parked in the last stall across the parking lot. "What are your plans for your car? I'm sure it's worth some money."

Helen chuckled. "You're right. Neal told me I could get quite a bit for it and he knows someone who would be interested. All I need to do is tell him when I'm ready to part with it. Honestly, I don't know that I can sell her while I'm still alive. She's the

closest thing to an old friend I have here. I always smile when I see her waiting there for me, and Neal keeps her road ready. I suppose her value is what they'll use to bury me. Morticians have an eye for antiques, you know."

Katherine smiled at that comment as she opened the door to leave. "Thanks again for a pleasant and informative morning. Enjoy your walk this afternoon. I'll talk to you soon."

Neal was waiting for Katherine at the end of the hall. His smile was open and welcoming. "Hi. You look great today. Do you have some time? I can fix us lunch."

His puppy-dog eagerness made Katherine feel young and delightfully foolish. "Sure I'll have lunch with you, but don't cook. Can't we call for a pizza or something?"

"Good idea. That will give us more talking time. We have a lot of catching up to do."

They walked to his apartment together, talking and laughing. Since it was the lunch hour, the halls were clear of tenants. Years of habit had trained these retired people to stop everything at 12:00 in order to eat at the proper time. They were willing to stand in lines at restaurants, competing with the workday lunch crowds, in order to maintain this routine. Many of the women had been farm wives who had prepared a large meal at midday for family members and seasonal workers. In fact, the noon meal was called "dinner" and the smaller, evening meal "supper". Such lifelong habits are very hard to change, so women at the Smiling Seniors often prepared a large roast beef on a Tuesday morning and found themselves eating leftovers all week. These feasts filled the halls of the building with delicious smells and wonderful memories of mornings on the farm. Today, Neal and Katherine recognized the ham and sweet potato bake at Liz Hurley's place.

Katherine was delighted with this addition to the atmosphere. "Do people bring

you food, Neal? It smells wonderful. I hope you get to sample something sometimes."

Neal laughed. "Don't worry. Liz will have a plate prepared for my supper tonight. She'll say she made way too much again and would I help her use it up. She says her recipe always serves twelve people, and she's never figured out a way to make less and have it turn out right. At least eight women living here have the same problem. It's another of my great good fortunes with this job."

"I like how you recognize your good fortunes. Especially now that I know you've also had great misfortune."

They had reached his apartment and slipped in unnoticed. Once inside, they couldn't wait to embrace. They fell together into a flurry of hands and hugs and searching mouths. Neal pulled back and said, "You know I have a real bed here. Should we go try it out?"

Katherine liked talking to him at this distance, about three inches from his eyes. "Let me think. Yes, I want to touch every part of you and get lost like we did before, but not here - not now. My car is still outside and I wouldn't want anyone to recognize certain noises coming from your room at midday."

She pulled back and stepped across the small living room and over to his computer corner. She sat on the leather office chair and smiled at him. He was still standing by the door, breathless and aroused. Katherine liked this open display of his desire for her.

They just looked longingly at each other for a few moments and then Neal spoke, "O.K. You're right. But can't we find a safe, comfortable place to explore each other? I really need to make love to you again. Soon."

"Me too. Believe me, this is not the answer I want to give you. And I'm not being coy. I just want to be able to relax completely and make all the noise I feel like. Do you know anybody with a fishing cabin or something?"

"Let me make a couple of calls this afternoon. I may have some leads. But can't

we do something quick and quiet here first?"

Katherine was already unbuttoning her blouse. "Stop right there. I've always admired the length of your couch. I promise to be very quiet, but we probably won't get to the pizza."

Neal kicked off his shoes and met her in front of the sofa. He hugged her and slipped his hands under her blouse as he reached around her back to gently unclasp her white lace bra. He brought his hand back around to cup her breast and caress her now erect nipple. Katherine shuddered at the delightful moment as they kissed and fell onto the couch. Just before he began to ease his fingers up her thigh, Neal quickly reached back to the coffee table and tapped a button on the remote control. The stereo system suddenly flooded the room with soothing saxophones and jazz rhythms. For a few teasing minutes, they pressed against each other in anticipation. Their fingers entwined as they explored the bodies they barely knew. She could feel him push his way into her as she eased her thighs down onto his narrow hips. She paused and did not make a sound. She felt her knees secure on the couch and began a gentle slow rocking motion. She lowered herself against his open shirt as he opened it further to feel her breasts slowly glide across his chest. Katherine looked down into his half-closed eyes and saw his mouth waiting, like a young bird, to be filled. She kissed him deeply and he moaned. They held the kiss as Katherine's rocking became more urgent. Neal gently wrapped both arms around Katherine's waist and rolled both of them together into a missionary position. Katherine followed the graceful movement as they stayed together in a lover's embrace.

The jazz had become flutes in the background as a local dog barked outside. The sound of children laughing could be heard on the spring breezes outside and the smell of baked ham drifted into the apartment. Katherine stroked Neal's thick hair and he stroked her left nipple. Their legs were askew but not uncomfortable and they both thought how good it felt to experience this perfect moment.

avenues to amazing debt and potential wealth. Katherine's house was in the package, as well as the new facility in Puerto Rico. Paul had included some patents on robotics and agreed to underwrite a portion of the Winterborne plant conversion. They solemnly signed the papers, shook hands and left for a celebration lunch.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tuesday morning Helen walked slowly to the Black Forest Cafe. She noticed the smell of newly mowed grass and the chirping of new baby robins. When she arrived at

Tuesday morning Leslie Logan placed a call to Judge Matthews. She arranged a meeting for Ann, Chris Mellon and herself that afternoon. She confirmed that Jack Wilson, Ann's attorney, would also be there. Leslie then sorted through the file she had prepared for the meeting.

Tuesday morning Neal Parker called his friend, Earl Wagner, to see if his fishing cabin had been opened for the season. When he learned that Earl had been working on it all weekend and it was ready to go, he asked when he might borrow it for a couple of days. Earl looked at his calendar and said he wasn't going back until Friday night, so Neal could come by for the key and use it until then. Neal said he'd get back to him, but he thought that might work.

"Thank you, Judge Matthews, for fitting us into your tight schedule on such short notice.

Tuesday morning Katherine went shopping in the lingerie department of a local woman's clothing store. She was in the mood for summer silk. She tried on several bras and decided on a whisper blue underwire to match her eyes. She kept waiting to feel a wave of guilt over her new decadence, but it hadn't arrived. In the meantime she was obsessed with the memory of his sensitive searching fingers.

Helen not only refused, but she became very hostile and aggressive toward

Tuesday morning Stephen met with Paul in a Chicago corporate attorney's office. They signed dozens of papers representing new partnerships and exclusion clauses with

avenues to amazing debt and potential wealth. Katherine's house was in the package, as well as the new facility in Puerto Rico. Paul had included some patents on robotics and agreed to underwrite a portion of the Winterborne plant conversion. They solemnly signed the papers, shook hands and left for a celebration lunch.

Tuesday morning Helen walked slowly to the Black Forest Cafe. She noticed the smell of newly mowed grass and the chirping of new baby robins. When she arrived at the cafe she ordered orange juice, an English Muffin and a soft-boiled egg. She enjoyed three cups of coffee, watched people walk down Main Street, muttered a few comments under her breath and left for home at about 10:15.

Judge Matthews was surprised by this development in Helen Grant's case. Certainly it was within the realm of fact-finding to have someone undergo psychological evaluation, but he was seldom asked to mandate involuntary orders for hospitalization. He was interested in hearing what they planned to present. The group arrived at exactly 2:00 and they were seated around the conference table in his office.

Jack Wilson was his usual calm self as he opened the fat folder in front of him. "Thank you, Judge Matthews, for fitting us into your tight schedule on such short notice. We have Helen's court date coming up in five short weeks and we hoped to get this particular piece of the puzzle in order as soon as possible. I have completed the necessary paperwork to have her committed to the state psychiatric hospital in Madison for a three-day evaluation period. Chris Mellon, the local social worker who was assigned her case, has asked her on several documented occasions to be voluntarily evaluated. Helen not only refused, but she became very hostile and aggressive toward Miss Mellon."

Jack handed some forms to judge Matthews, who began leafing through them.

Jack continued his explanation while the judge read the documents. "Helen has no personal physician who we could contact about her general health and Miss Mellon was able to gather only third person reports for her records. This seems a bit severe - I know, Judge - but we really need some clinical information to support our contention that the dear old lady needs a guardian to look after her."

Judge Matthews looked up at Jack and asked, "Did I hear you say that this 93-year-old person has no physician? She has no regular check-ups to catch things old people get, like diabetes or high blood pressure? Is she ever sick?"

Leslie Logan spoke up. "Well, Judge, she was pretty sick just a few weeks ago. They made a doctor's appointment for her and everything, but she wouldn't go. She did get better after awhile, but we all worried every day that she would die in her sleep or something. It was a difficult time for all of us."

"All of us?"

"Oh, I meant all the people who live at the Smiling Seniors Apartments. It's hard not to think of them as my family. They tend to look out for one another, you know."

The judge smiled slightly. "Thank you for clearing that up for me. Say, Jack, this paper is dated today. Do you have plans for admitting her this afternoon?"

Chris spoke up this time. "Yes, Judge. I've called and put all the preparations in place. They can come and get her at 5:00 or so for an evening admission to the hospital. Then they could keep her there until Saturday morning for observation and evaluation. All they need are the legal documents to set it in motion. I'm so glad you had time for us today."

"You people have been very busy, it seems. Ann, what are your thoughts on this matter? She is your aunt, after all. Are you comfortable having the men in white coats haul her off to the loony bin in front of the neighbors?"

Ann squirmed in her seat, just a little, and then spoke. "I know how this might appear to some people, but most folks who see her walking all over town think she's a

little crazy anyway. This at least looks like I'm trying to do something about her."

The judge looked at Ann out of the corner of his eye as he read. "Don't you mean to say: 'do something *for* her'? I understood your interest to be that of a concerned relative, not an embarrassed one."

She squirmed more this time. "Oh, I'm sorry, Your Honor. I must have miss-spoken. Of course I want to do this for her own good. I am her closest living relative, after all."

The judge smiled and shook his head while signing the documents before him. "Well Jack, you and Miss Mellon have put together a pretty tight package here. I suppose I'll approve it, but I can't imagine someone knocking on my door to cart me off for testing I didn't ask for. It seems to border on legal kidnapping to me. But technically, there seems to be no reason I can give not to do it in this case. Good luck and good afternoon."

Judge Matthews left the room through a side entrance and the four conspirators laughed and talked as they planned their next move. They had only a few hours to make the necessary calls and contacts.

At 2:00 on Tuesday, Neal called Katherine at home. She had hoped it was he when she heard the phone ring. She hadn't waited by the phone for a man to call her in years. He sounded excited and happy. "Hi Katherine, are you alone?"

"Yes, Neal. I'm alone a lot these days. You've given me lots of new things to think about though. What's on your mind?"

"I got us a place, a fishing cabin about a half-hour away. It belongs to a friend of mine and I have the keys in my hand right now, even as we speak. Can you get away?"

Katherine hadn't expected him to get back to her so soon and she was pleased. "Let me think. Yes, I think so. Tonight I have no plans and nobody wonders where I am

in the middle of an afternoon. Womanly errands and things, you know. Where should I meet you? Is it too dangerous for us to ride out there together? By the way, where exactly are we going?"

Neal was almost laughing out loud. "This is so great. Earl's cabin is up on Rock Lake. You turn right at White Pine Road and it's the third cabin on your left. It sits back a little from the road, but it's right on the water. It's painted a dark brown with black shutters and a huge stone fireplace holds up the north side. The driveway goes all the way down to the water, so park your car behind the cabin, away from the road. You'll see my truck there. Can you make it by 3:30?"

Katherine laughed and said, "I can make it by 2:30, but I guess I'll wait." "I'll see you then. And, oh, there's a refrigerator so I'm bringing some snacks to get us through the evening. Do you like shrimp?"

"Yes, Neal. I like shrimp a lot. See you there. And thanks."

"Trust me, it's my treat. No need to thank me."

Stephen called Katherine at 3:00 to tell her the good news. There was no answer at home, but that wasn't unusual this time of day. He would call her again later. He hoped she would come with him to look at houses in Puerto Rico next month. They could stay in hotels for awhile, but he was excited about real estate which might be available. He wondered if he would decide to take up deep sea fishing or some other warm water sport after all those long winters in Wisconsin. Maybe he and Paul could chip in and share a boat or something.

Helen finished her short nap at 2:30 and put on her shoes for her afternoon walk to town. She had decided to ask Sheila for a slice of rye bread instead of whole wheat.

She had some peanut butter in the cabinet and she liked it on toasted rye. Helen even thought about giving Meredith a call. She hadn't talked to her in weeks and Helen wondered about Emily's new tooth. She smiled at the thought of hearing Meredith's voice again. She always sounded so happy.

The hospital attendants sat waiting with Leslie in her office. She had assured them that Helen was seldom home later than 5:30 and it was still only 5:15. They complained, however, that their shift ended at 7:00 and they wanted to be back in Madison in time to clock out. Their wait ended, however, when Leslie identified the woman walking toward the building as Helen. The young men rose immediately to intercept Helen on the sidewalk. She looked uneasy as they approached her and she shouted at them as each one took hold of her just under the elbow. Leslie was with them and she was talking quietly to Helen, trying to calm her. The angry old woman would not be calmed. She kicked Leslie and asked what she thought she was doing. Leslie read the legal paper aloud as the two young men lifted Helen into the back of the hospital van. Helen shouted various profanities and tried to hit them with her cane, but one of the attendants pulled the cane from her hand and laid it on the floor beside the seat where they strapped her in. Leslie watched them close the door of the van from the inside as one attendant attempted to make Helen comfortable in the seat and the other started the engine. Within three minutes of first seeing her, the two-man team had trapped their prey and left the area. They would indeed be back in time to clock out and have dinner with their families. Leslie walked across the parking lot to where the van had been and picked up a slice of rye bread wrapped in plastic. She shook her head and pondered over what strange things people throw away.

Neal's instructions had led Katherine directly to her destination. The cabin was more like a small ranch house than a fishing retreat. Neal's friend had spent a lot of effort making it inviting. Small shrubs hugged the bottom of the long windows and flowers were peeking through the ground all along the winding sidewalk. The lake sparkled fifty yards below, just beyond a well-kept yard. This was not just a fishing retreat. Families spent summer hours here, laughing and splashing and eating grilled hamburgers.

Neal opened the back door as she approached it. He held the door for her and bowed as she entered. "How do you like the place?"

Katherine explored the large room she had entered. Open beams and wooden floors and long glass windows gave the space a comfortable grandeur that appealed to her immediately. "Not exactly roughing it. I thought you said this was your friend's fishing cabin. I've seen some of those and they are usually full of second-hand bad furniture and dirty plastic blinds. This is like something from a travel magazine. It's wonderful, Neal. I'm impressed."

"I hoped you would be. Would you like a fire?"

"Perfection. Yes. That would be grand." Katherine let Neal pile the logs in the fireplace while she explored the other rooms. None was as spectacular as the main room, but everything was well-kept and cheerful. She especially liked the large bedroom, where a white thick chenille bedspread added softness to yards of natural wood. A skylight over the bed displayed a radiant patch of blue sky, but Katherine imagined a deep night view of glittering stars against solid black.

The two of them settled in and watched the fire take hold. Neal asked Katherine if she would like to walk by the lake, so they held hands and strolled together until about 5:30. They were the only people around, since this early in the season few people spent weekdays at the lake. Katherine was amazed how simple life seemed this quiet afternoon and how removed from that simple life she felt.

Stephen tried to call Katherine again at 5:30, but there was still no answer. Maybe she went somewhere with Molly. But then he remembered that Phil and Molly were in San Francisco this week, celebrating their anniversary. Oh well, he had plans for dinner at Paul and Jane's house. He would just talk to Katherine tomorrow. There was plenty of time to tell her the news, since it would affect both of them for years to come.

Helen sat and watched the lovely Wisconsin spring through the windows of the hospital van. She had to sit in one position the entire trip and she was beginning to feel her left leg falling asleep. She probably would be unable to stand on it when they arrived at their destination, wherever that was. She had only heard portions of the document Leslie had been reading when those two men accosted her. She thought it said something about a hospital and evaluations and seventy-two hours. Helen tried to think who she might call to fix this. Then she realized that she didn't even know if she would be able to use a phone. She felt a tear on her face and shook her head to escape it. She hadn't cried in years.

Ann had invited both Leslie and Chris to dine with her at the club Tuesday night, in gratitude for their hard work in helping get Helen evaluated at the hospital. Neither Leslie nor Chris was a member, but they had been to the club for various banquets and fund-raising events. They rode together in Leslie's car and found Ann waiting for them in the comfortable foyer of the spacious building. She escorted them to a corner table and asked the waitress to bring her the wine list.

After ordering the proper wine for the evening dinner special, Ann raised a glass to the two women who had helped put the plan into place. "I have really appreciated the work the two of you put into this. Perhaps the evaluation alone will be enough to grant

me guardianship for Helen. I know both of you share my hope that in a few short weeks, she will find a place to live where caring people look after her every need."

Leslie spoke up at that comment. "Do you have such a place in mind?"

Ann put her glass down and smiled broadly. "As a matter of fact, I do. Ralph and I drove over last fall. There is a group home, located about forty miles south of here, where people like Helen can get twenty-four hour supervision. They house eight women and there is a vacancy being held for Helen right now. The place is really lovely, on the side of a hill overlooking a small river. The nearest town is nine miles away and the residents keep a garden. Helen will love it there."

Chris had heard of it. "Oh, I know where you mean. One of my friends used it as a sample in some research she was doing for a graduate degree. Everything is real communal and all the residents are assigned some housekeeping duty to keep them involved in life. They can choose to cook several meals a week or general housecleaning or mending or crafts of various kinds. It sounded like a wonderful place to be. Helen would be so happy there."

Leslie agreed. "I've always thought Helen just needed something to keep her busy. I guess since she never got married or had children, she missed out on a lot in life. Maybe now, in her last years, she can experience some of the pleasures of being a woman. I'm so happy for her."

The waitress brought their salads and the women continued their observations on true womanhood in Winterborne.

Neal and Katherine were deep under the covers of the soft chenille paradise by 7:30. Their first two encounters had been explosive and urgent as they discovered their mutual need. Now they had some time to slow down and explore. They found this rather hard to do. When they realized they were moving toward frantic groping once again,

they started laughing and pulled back from each other. They lay naked, face to face, and pressed their bodies into a gently curling caress and hug. They stopped stroking and relaxed.

Neal kissed Katherine's neck. "Have I told you how much I like your body? All of it? And how wonderful you smell. I had the scent of you all over my sofa yesterday. It was amazing. I read the evening paper all by myself, stretched out on my sofa, and I was distracted by you. I think that's what made me call Earl so soon. I had to touch and smell you again."

Katherine kissed him lightly on his face and ran the tips of the fingers down the long arch of his back. They pulled more tightly together and began a smooth joint rocking motion in a quiet rhythm that matched their even breathing. They talked quietly of how good it felt to be so connected and then Neal gently tipped her legs open by pushing her knee up and back. He glided into her and enjoyed how well they fit together before he placed his hands under her shoulders and lifted her upright. They turned together until they were in a sitting position and she was facing him on his lap. Katherine raised herself up a little as she wrapped her legs around his back. He helped ease her into place as she lowered herself more deeply onto him. At this angle, he reached a delightful place inside her and she let out a little shout of pleasure as he continued the easy pace they had begun together. She could hardly believe the new sensations she was experiencing. Enjoying an orgasm that made her feel an electric charge, she arched her back and fell limp into Neal's chest. He asked if she wanted to rest a while as he pushed her wet hair from her face. She just smiled and kissed him and said she wanted to continue. He rolled her back onto the bed and made her comfortable before moving back into her. Their adventure continued for ten more minutes, before he came in a wave of energy that left him heavy and sweating on Katherine's chest. They held and stroked each other in the dark quiet room with the skylight displaying the edge of a full moon overhead.

At 7:30, Stephen arrived at Paul and Jane's home for dinner. He had been there often during his months in Chicago, but this was the first dinner he would share with them as a business partner. Jane met him at the door and took his arm to lead him to the dining room. Paul was waiting with a chilled bottle of champagne and an open file folder.

Opening the folder and handing him a glass of the wine he suggested, "Why don't you look these over, Stephen, and we'll toast our new company logo. I had my ad firm bring over some samples this afternoon. I know my favorites, but I would like to hear your choices before I tell you mine."

Stephen happily turned over the colorful displays and artwork in the packet. "Oh, they all look very professional. This will be a difficult decision. How about if we talk about it over dinner and get some input from Jane? From the looks of her decorating skills, I would say she has a good eye for design."

Jane blushed appropriately at the unexpected compliment. "Thank you, Stephen. I'd be honored to be part of this happy event. But should we call Katherine to join us in a day or so and have her here to share this, too?"

"Oh, I don't think she'll feel too left out. She's never had much interest in my business. She just likes to spend the money I bring home."

"Well in that case, let the fun begin."

In spite of her struggles and protests, by 7:30 that evening Helen had been examined by a young intern, questioned by a staff psychologist, declined dinner and been bathed by a nurse's aide. She cooperated with none of them and actually spit on the psychologist when he asked her if she felt depressed. She now sat in a hospital gown and

cotton robe on a long bench in a vast well lit room in the Madison State Hospital. Other patients walked aimlessly around the room or sat mesmerized by the loud television suspended above them in the corner. The watchers had their heads tilted slightly upward as they followed the events on the large screen. They laughed in unison occasionally or caught their breath in wonder at something displayed in color before them. Helen grunted and turned the other way. She had no cane, so she felt less secure moving around than usual. She found a relatively quiet spot near the end of the long bench and watched people. She spoke to no one, even when approached.

Ralph came by the club at 10:00 to retrieve his wife and drive her home. He bought the women a brandy first, and entertained them with funny stories of his travels abroad. Ann liked this feature of her husband's personality. No matter where they went, he could turn a group of strangers into old friends. He had a natural ability to remember names and he never repeated a story in the same company twice. This helped Ann and Ralph stay on invitation lists all over the state of Wisconsin. Chris and Leslie were delighted to be out this late on a work night, being entertained by such prominent citizens of Winterborne.

Katherine and Neal left the cabin at 9:00, although she would have been happier spending the night. Neal decided to go back to his apartment too, in case there was something at the Smiling Seniors that needed his attention. He had worn his pager, but sometimes the tenants didn't like using it to reach him. Katherine had, however, requested they make one stop together on the way home. She pulled her Lexus onto the gravel road and Neal stayed a discreet distance behind her as they drove to the Country Club.

Katherine by-passed the parking area in front of the main entrance and drove behind the clubhouse to the golf cart storage building. Neal parked even farther away and joined her as she walked onto the dark golf course. They held hands as she led him around trees and sand traps and water hazards. She finally paused behind a long row of budding bushes on the crest of a small hill. The moon displayed a narrow creek at the foot of the rise and he could smell the clean aroma of the freshly cut new grass spreading before them. Although the dining room of the clubhouse was well-lit and he could hear faint music from the piano in the lobby, this portion of the course was secluded from view and had the feel of a private retreat. He drew Katherine close to him and they held one another for awhile without speaking.

"Just what do you have in mind, Katherine? You said you had a story to share with me, but you wanted to set the right mood. O.K. This place puts me in a wonderful mood – so tell me your story."

Katherine turned and swept her arm across the night air to showcase the whole area of the sixth green. "This is where Helen and her father came to talk when she was a young girl. They talked about life and plans and possibilities. He allowed her to make her own decisions from a very young age. They were very close."

"It sounds like Helen has really started opening up to you. I don't imagine she's shared that information with a lot of people."

"You're right, I don't think even Ann knows about this place. Helen spoke about it like it was a special secret she had with her father. Apparently Helen's mother planted that row of lilac bushes and her father liked to bring Helen to this spot to remember those days with him. And besides, golf had also become an important part of Helen's life."

"Really? I didn't think many women played golf back then. She must have been somethin' else when she was young."

Katherine laughed. "Wouldn't you say she's *somethin' else* even now?"

Neal had to agree with that observation. "It is beautiful here. I can imagine her

out on the course, swinging a club and walking across the fairway in her official golf gear. I'll bet she never used a cart."

"Probably not, but she was good enough to consider becoming a professional golfer. That was the decision she made right here one day with her father. She chose to go to school and teach for a living instead of fighting the odds as a woman golfer. She said it was the only decision she regretted. I think she still wonders what that life would have brought to her."

"Wow. I think she's getting to you and I like that. I know she got to me a long time ago, but I don't think she has that affect on most people. I'm glad you and I have that in common. Do we need to get back? I mean, you've been out since early this afternoon. No one much cares where I am, but you might be missed."

"I know. I just wanted to show you this place. We can go back now."

When Neal arrived at his apartment, Liz Hurley came running down the hall to talk to him before he got inside. "Neal. Neal. Wait a minute. Something weird happened while you were gone. There was this van with two young men in it, and they grabbed Helen and put her in it and then drove away with her. Leslie was out there with them, so I know it had something to do with her, but it all happened so fast that only a couple of us saw it happen."

Neal stopped dead in his tracks and looked directly at Liz. "Are you sure? Why would somebody do that? When did it happen? Does anybody know anything?"

"Well, I can only tell you what I heard. But Mary Yoder is telling people that it has to do with that court thing next month. They say that the judge was mad because Helen never went to the doctor and he needed to know if she is all right. So he just sent the hospital to come over and get her. It's that State Hospital, in Madison, you know - where the crazy people go."

you were." "Damn. And I wasn't here. Of all days . . ."

"What's that? I know you were gone all day, but you couldn't have done much about it from what I hear."

"Thanks, Liz. I have a few calls to make. I really appreciate your telling me about it." Neal quickly slipped into his apartment and grabbed his phone. First he called Leslie Logan to confirm what happened, but her husband told him that Leslie was out for the evening.

Then he called Katherine to tell her what little he knew.

Katherine had just stepped into the kitchen when the phone started ringing. She smiled hopefully. Neal should be home about now. "Hi, Neal. I hoped it was you. How are you feeling? I'm perfect."

Neal responded with a voice she hadn't expected. He sounded really upset about something. "Katherine, I have some really bad news for you."

Katherine sat down on a kitchen chair. "Neal, what on earth is wrong? I saw you just a half hour ago."

"It's Helen. They've taken her away to the State Hospital in Madison. At least that's the information I have so far. It sounds pretty certain, though. It seems the judge signed some papers to have her tested or something. I can't reach Leslie and I don't know who else to call."

"What do you mean, 'taken her away'?"

"It sounds like they just grabbed her in the parking lot. Two big young guys. She must have been terrified. Damn, I wasn't there to help her. At least I could have ridden along or something. Of all days."

"Neal, I want to come over and find out what's going on. Is there anyone there who might know?"

"Well I was just about to walk down to Mary Yoder's and see if she is still up. It seems that Liz got most of what I know from Mary. I can wait a few minutes, though, if

you want to go along."

"I'll be right over."

At 10:00, Mary Yoder was still awake watching television when Katherine and Neal rang the bell. She was not surprised to see them, given the events of the afternoon. She invited them in and offered them decaffeinated coffee, which they accepted. Mary then explained what had happened to Helen in the parking lot. She had her information about the court papers directly from Leslie Logan, so it all seemed to be perfectly legal, if a bit drastic. Mary said that tenants were divided in their perceptions of the procedure. Many were concerned that if it could happen to Helen, it could happen to them someday. But most believed it must have been done for Helen's own good. Judge Matthews was a good man, after all, and Helen could get a little out of hand sometimes. Neal and Katherine thanked her for her time and left just at 10:30.

Katherine turned sadly to Neal in the foyer of the Smiling Seniors to say good-night. "I don't suppose there's much we can do any more tonight. I feel so bad for Helen. I wonder what she must be thinking and feeling right now."

Neal wanted to take Katherine in his arms, but restrained himself in such a public place. "I'll go right over to the hospital first thing in the morning. I know a few people who work there. I can get in as an 'unofficial' visitor. I'll call when I know something."

"You never cease to amaze me. Just how many contacts do you have?"

Neal smiled and shook his head. "Don't you remember that it's who you know, not what you know, that really counts. Now, go home and get some sleep. I understand it won't be easy, but you'll need it. I'm going to do the same thing. Be careful driving home."

Katherine turned and looked back at him, "In spite of this horrid ending, I want to thank you for a beautiful day. It was extraordinary. Honest."

"Me, too. I hope we get to do it again and savor it longer. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Stephen got back to his Chicago apartment just after 10:30 and called Katherine one last time before going to bed. He felt happily tired after this eventful day. He was starting a new exciting chapter in his life and he wanted to tell Katherine about it. Just six months ago he thought his life would go on in Winterborne as it had been for over ten years. He had envisioned grandchildren and travel and golf at the club every summer. He had seen himself as a regular pillar of the community. But this Puerto Rico venture changed everything. And it had happened so fast. He hadn't been unhappy before but now he felt strangely energized by the adventure.

Katherine picked up the phone on the fifth ring as she entered the house. "Hello. This is Katherine Mitchell."

"Hi. It's me. Did I interrupt anything?"

"Ah, no. As a matter of fact I just walked in the door. How are things going?" She sat in the same chair she had when Neal called earlier.

"Things are going really well, as a matter of fact. Paul and I signed the partnership agreement this afternoon. Puerto Rico is a go."

Katherine paused before answering. "Stephen, I didn't know it would happen so quickly. You didn't tell me you had gone this far. I thought you might think more about it. I even thought you might discuss it more with me."

"We discussed it a lot while Paul and Jane stayed with us last week. Weren't you listening?" Stephen was getting annoyed that Katherine wasn't more excited about the plan. He was beginning to wish he hadn't called her. He had been so gleeful just a few minutes ago.

"I thought I was listening. But all your conversations were about things that were going to happen in the future. I didn't know that the future was two days later."

Katherine wasn't sure why she was so annoyed that Stephen had signed the papers today.

Maybe she couldn't shake her worry over Helen.

"You don't sound too happy for us. This will change both our lives and I was hoping to get a little support from you. For some reason, you don't seem to want to get involved. Is there something besides Helen's investigation that's distracting you at home?"

That got Katherine's full attention as she pictured the fishing cabin and the skylight. "No. Life is pretty regular here most of the time, but I am upset about Helen this evening. It seems they carted her off to Madison State Hospital for some testing. The problem is, she didn't have any choice in the matter. They grabbed her right off the sidewalk and threw her in a van."

Stephen shook his head as he spoke into the phone. "Poor old lady. Judge Matthews probably had to make a tough decision to get something like that pulled off. I don't think I would like his job."

"Stephen, I'm worried about Helen, not the stresses of Judge Matthew's job."

"Oh, I know, Katherine, but these things do happen. I'm sorry to hear it upset you so much. Did they say how long the evaluation would take?"

Katherine was getting more and more annoyed with him. "No, Stephen. I didn't get a chance to ask the right people. I heard it third hand from Mary Yoder. I'll have more information on all of that once I get to talk to Leslie Logan."

"Sorry. I just thought that the Helen thing was where you were all day. I tried to call several times, but you weren't around."

Katherine squirmed in the wooden chair. "Oh, I was out and about all afternoon, with errands and things. Then I treated myself to dinner and a movie. Sometimes I get bored, just hanging around the house all the time. With Molly out of town I had to fend for myself tonight. I managed, but it kept me from knowing about Helen until Neal called me."

"Neal called you? Why did he do that? I didn't know he knew you very well."

Katherine gulped and hurried on. "Neal knows that I'm over there a lot, asking questions and visiting with Helen. She doesn't get many visitors and he thought I might be interested in what happened over there."

"That was thoughtful of him."

"He seems like a nice guy to me. I think Ann is all wrong about him. But that's another story. Congratulations on your business venture, Stephen. I hope everything turns out well for the two of you."

Stephen perked up at the mention of the new business. "Thanks Katherine. I'm doing this for you as much as for me, you know. This should be a great next step for us."

"Thanks for thinking of me, Stephen. I'm really very tired now and I think I'll turn in for the night. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Good-night."

"Good-night, Honey." Katherine didn't respond with her usual smile. Instead just grunted and gave Leslie an icy stare. It worked. Leslie had trouble getting the key in the lock.

As soon as they were inside, Katherine asked, "So exactly what happened here yesterday?" Helen was escorted down a long hall at about 9:30. The attendant opened the door to a small room with a bed and dresser. She was asked if she would like something to help her sleep, but she declined. She did, however, ask to use a telephone. Helen had decided to try to reach Neal or Katherine or even Sheila. Helen was told that phone privileges at the hospital were only available until 8:00 each day, so she would need to wait until morning. Helen climbed slowly into the sterile bed and for the second time that day, she cried.

Leslie was getting angrier by the minute. "Do you really believe that? This wasn't a routine office visit to the local clinic. The woman was kidnapped by strangers. Don't you think that was a bit severe?"

"You, if anybody, should know how stubborn she is about getting medical treatment. Do you really think she would have done this willingly? Her lack of cooperation is part of her problem, you know. She brought this on herself."

"I see. It sounds like you and I will never agree on this, so I think I'll be leaving."

now. I'll go see her today and let you know how she's doing. Do you at least know when she'll be free to return home?"

"I understand they can hold her for only seventy-two hours, so she'll be able to come back Saturday morning. She's not allowed to have any visitors during the evaluation period though and I need to find transportation for her to come back."

Katherine chuckled sarcastically. "They're not going to pay for hauling her off to a strange place against her will, but they won't cover bringing her back. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Can I at least arrange her ride home?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Katherine was waiting for Leslie when she arrived for work on Wednesday morning. Leslie was amazed at how quickly news traveled. She smiled and said good morning as she opened the door to the office. However, Katherine didn't respond with her usual polite greeting, but instead just grunted and gave Leslie an icy stare. It worked. Leslie had trouble getting the key in the lock.

As soon as they were inside, Katherine asked, "So exactly what happened here yesterday? And why didn't anyone call me about it? I am her court appointed advocate. How can I do my job if I don't know what's going on?"

"There wasn't any reason to get you involved in this. It's simply procedural. Judge Matthews will need all the information we can supply in order to make his decision. This part of that information is medical and has nothing to do with your observations of her."

Katherine was getting angrier by the minute. "Do you really believe that? This wasn't a routine office visit to the local clinic. The woman was kidnapped by strangers. Don't you think that was a bit severe?"

"You, if anybody, should know how stubborn she is about getting medical treatment. Do you really think she would have done this willingly? Her lack of cooperation is part of her problem, you know. She brought this on herself."

"I see. It sounds like you and I will never agree on this, so I think I'll be leaving

now. I'll go see her today and let you know how she's doing. Do you at least know when she'll be free to return home?"

"I understand they can hold her for only seventy-two hours, so she'll be able to come back Saturday morning. She's not allowed to have any visitors during the evaluation period though and I need to find transportation for her to come back."

Katherine chuckled sarcastically. "Oh, so the state pays for hauling her off to a strange place against her will, but they won't cover bringing her back. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Can I at least arrange her ride home?"

Leslie looked sheepishly down at her desk. "Yes. That would help a lot. Ann and I wondered how we could work that out. Thank you for the offer."

Katherine turned abruptly and walked out the door. "You're quite welcome."

Neal's friend, Dan, was waiting at the service entrance to the Madison State Hospital. They walked together through the maze of hallways inside the massive building until they reached the third floor activity room, where Helen spent her daytime hours during her short stay. Dan explained to the hospital attendants in the room that Neal was a social worker from Winterborne who was there to visit Helen. Once inside, Neal took a deep breath and put on a smile as he approached the sad old woman sitting at the end of a long bench under the only window in the room. She brightened as he approached. She lifted up slightly to stand, but he waved and motioned her to sit back down.

As he sat beside her, he took her hand in his. He could feel it shaking like a trapped bird. "Hi, Queen E. How are the locals treating you here?"

Helen smiled at his light comment. "Oh, you know how it is in the Western Regions. Their ways are a bit uncivilized, but they seem to mean well. Are you here to take me home?"

hospital. Neal looked away for a moment to retain his casual affect, "Sorry, not today. But Katherine called me this morning and asked if I would come with her on Saturday morning to bring you back to Winterborne. That's only one day from now. Will you be O.K. until then?"

Helen looked around the room and shrugged slightly. "I suppose I can manage another day. But my legs want to walk and they won't give me my cane. They're afraid I'll use it as a weapon. You know, I think they're right about that."

Neal chuckled and stood up. He offered her his arm to raise her from the bench. Helen gave him a warm smile and accepted the offer. Neal and Helen spent the next hour walking in a large circle around the noisy room. Various patients approached them and made comments or tried to join them. By the third rotation, they were the leaders of a parade of people all dressed alike in cotton robes and terry cloth slippers. The pace was slow and the noise was loud, but the exercise added a new dimension to an otherwise chaotic environment.

Dan came back and told Neal it was time for him to leave. Neal introduced Dan to Helen and then led her back to her spot on the bench. He waved as he left the room and took another deep breath. He hoped she would indeed be O.K. in this room for another day.

Stephen had stopped smiling. "Katherine, in case you haven't noticed lately, you seem to be having trouble writing this latest event for her report. She found herself becoming angry every time she tried to express it on paper. She decided to call Stephen and tell him about it. It was nearly 6:00 when she called and she hoped she would catch him at the apartment before he went out to eat.

Stephen answered on the third ring. "Hi, Katherine. I was just about to call you. Is everything O.K.?"

"Not exactly. I found out that I'm not able to visit Helen while she's in the

hospital. Something about the observation process and visitors disturbing the plan. I can't seem to think about anything else since they hauled her off."

Stephen smiled and shook his head. "Katherine, I think you may be overreacting a bit because you like the woman. Think about it. If the state has procedures in place for situations like this, there must be a reason. Maybe the evaluation will help Judge Matthews make a better decision."

"Right, Stephen. Being kidnapped can be good for a person."

"C'mon Katherine. Give me a break. I'm not the enemy here. I just want this thing to be over so you can concentrate on our move to Puerto Rico."

That got Katherine's attention. "You make that sound pretty final."

"Well it is. The partnership is in place. The Winterborne plant relocation plan is being put in motion. The first line should be up and running in Puerto Rico by late summer. I got us hotel reservations down there for the first week in June. You should be finished with this Helen thing by then, shouldn't you? I mean, isn't the court date set for the end of May?"

Katherine was surprised by the speed at which these huge decisions were being made. "Yes. May 29. But why didn't you ask if I wanted to go to Puerto Rico in June? You've made a lot of arrangements for our future without involving me in the process, haven't you?"

Stephen had stopped smiling. "Katherine, in case you haven't noticed lately, you seem overly occupied with certain responsibilities in your own life."

"That doesn't mean you couldn't have at least asked, instead of assuming so much."

"I've kept you informed about my plans to expand and relocate. Maybe you just weren't listening very well."

Katherine caught her breath and barked back, "I think one of us isn't listening, but I don't think it's me. So what other plans have you made for our future together?"

"C'mon Katherine. Settle down. You're going to help find us a house and I'll let you decorate my new office down there. You'll have fun with tropical colors and fabrics. You've always liked that stuff. Look at all the time you've spent making our house look like it does. You'll have plenty of things to do."

"Thanks for giving me the tough assignments."

"Katherine, I don't think this is getting us anywhere. You're just still upset about the Helen thing. Maybe we ought to hang up now."

"I couldn't agree more, Stephen. By the way, you might not want to come home this weekend. I'll be going to Madison to bring Helen back and I'll be much too busy to entertain you."

"Fine. I can find plenty to keep me busy here in Chicago. Paul and I have a lot of work to do and I understand he has some extra tickets for the Bulls game Saturday night."

"Have fun. Say hello to Paul and Jane for me."

"I'll do that. Good-by, Katherine."

"Good-by, Stephen."

Katherine sat back down at her desk and wrote exactly everything she knew about Helen's experience in the parking lot on Tuesday. The words suddenly flowed as she expressed her anger on paper. She had become an advocate instead of an impartial observer and she liked how that felt.

Helen was interviewed several times during her stay at the state hospital. The attending psychiatrists were kind and patient with her, but not one succeeded in getting her to answer their questions. She refused to interact and sat looking at them when they spoke to her. They tried various medications to calm her and perhaps get her to open up to them, but nothing worked. They had no verbal responses to document for her record and draw conclusions from. Instead they had the attendants take notes on her behavior,

to see if any patterns evolved. This was not revealing, either. Helen had sat in the same place on the bench every day and moved only once, when a social worker from Winterborne visited her and took her for a walk around the room. The doctors asked for the name of the social worker to see if he had recorded anything she said to him. Oddly, staff could not locate this man when they called the county welfare office.

By Saturday morning, the only report they could file on Helen was one filled with negatives. She didn't cooperate. She didn't talk to doctors or attendants. She didn't interact with other patients. She didn't move around the activity room. She didn't watch television. She didn't get violent and she didn't smile. She didn't eat much and she didn't sleep much. The psychiatrists suggested that Helen may be depressed since she didn't interact with her world. Perhaps, if the court appointed a guardian, that person should consider contacting a local psychiatrist to look into prescribing anti-depressant medications for her. They felt that Helen would benefit from more physical activity. She seemed to sit around too much.

A long horseshoe drive led up to the Madison State Hospital's main entrance. Helen stood outside the columned edifice and waited for her ride home. She had insisted on leaving the building as soon as she was dressed on Saturday morning. She stroked her wool beret before placing it at the appropriate angle on her head. She gripped her cane tightly as she walked without aid down the long corridor to the exit. The sun shone brightly through the heavy double doors leading to her freedom and she had smiled broadly as the attendant opened the doors for her.

For more than an hour she waited patiently and tapped her cane on the concrete walk. Then suddenly she caught her breath and let out a long laugh of sheer joy. Pulling into the curving drive was a 1949 dark grey Ford. Its heavy metal body sparkled in the bright sun and the sound of thick rubber tires crunching the asphalt was music to her ears.

Her young attendant watched the well-kept antique approach them. "Wow. That's some car. I wonder what it's doing here. Maybe it belongs to one of the doctors." Helen turned to him and spoke grandly. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, young man. That beautiful creature belongs to me."

The attendant smiled and turned to Helen. He exaggerated a bow and kissed her hand. "Ma'am. I had no idea. You have my humble apologies."

Neal parked the car in front of them and the attendant walked Helen to the passenger door and opened it. As he assisted Helen up and into her seat, he said to Neal, "You're really lucky to be able to drive this car. It's a beauty."

Neal helped Helen settle in. "I agree. This Good Lady has been very generous to me. Thank you for helping her out, but I can transport the queen from here."

The attendant laughed at his comment. "I guess you never know who'll come to this place. Have a nice trip home."

Neal looked over at the smiling Helen. "Did you notice our passenger today?"

Katherine leaned over the seat and rested her hand on Helen's shoulder. "Hello, Helen. I asked if I could ride along and enjoy the pleasures of this wonderful car. Do you mind?"

Helen continued to smile and looked back at Katherine. "I don't mind at all. This is a lovely day and it's wonderful to be able to share it with friends. Hurry, Neal. I want to get away from here as quickly as possible."

Neal eased the old car out of the drive and headed for the interstate leading back to Winterborne. He knew he would slow traffic a bit on the fast four-lane corridor to Milwaukee, but he also knew that many drivers waved and honked when they encountered the Ford. This beautiful spring day would increase that reaction. The trio took off on their cheerful expedition home.

Katherine leaned over the seat again and asked Helen, "How did it go for you while you were there?"

Helen continued to look out the window at the passing scenes of Madison neighborhoods. "The time passed and now I'm here. That's about all that happened. I watched a lot of crazy people and not-so-crazy people try to fill the time as best they could. It's a dreadful place, really. But I'm fine now. This morning I feel grand. Thank you for asking though, Katherine."

Neal pulled onto the interstate and the first car they encountered honked and the three people inside waved frantically. Neal honked back and everyone in the other car laughed and clapped their approval.

The three of them rode in silence for awhile and then Helen spoke. "This is a wonderful treat for me, Neal. I was feeling old and tired until I saw you pull in. It's just what the doctor ordered."

Neal glanced over at her and said, "Blue Mountain State Park is just north of here a bit. How would you like to stop for lunch there? Do you think you're up to it or are you too tired from all the activity in your life this week?"

Helen shook her head and responded, "I was tired before, but now I feel energized. I would love to visit the park. I haven't been there since Alpha was alive. It's a beautiful place and I'm sure there must be spring flowers everywhere. Yes, let's lunch there. Suddenly I'm starved."

They left the interstate at the next exit and headed north. The park was about a half-hour's drive through winding countryside, where the landscape was dotted with dairy farms. People who were outside in their yards or working the fields waved and smiled as the car sped past them. Eventually they came to the park entrance and drove into avenues lined with pine trees. Neal drove to a sunny clearing where a picnic table and barbecue pit sat waiting for them. Katherine walked Helen to the table while Neal opened the trunk and took out the picnic lunch basket.

Helen saw the basket and commented, "You two really planned for this, didn't you? Did you make the food, Katherine?"

Katherine shook her head and laughed. "I wish I could take the credit, Helen. I'll bet the food is excellent and I'm also sure it's food you'll like. Sheila put the basket together for us and she even included a thermos of hot water for your tea. So you like her strawberry pie, huh? She included a whole pie, so we could all get enough."

"Sheila has always been so thoughtful. If she made it, the food will be very good." Helen's eyes glistened. "Oh, Neal, could I? I mean, I don't even have a license

Helen sat and watched as Neal and Katherine spread the brightly-colored plaid cotton tablecloth on the worn wooden table. The wind was blowing gently, but not enough to fight the cloth. Its pastel patterned corners rippled and danced as the laughing couple set the table. Sheila had even included a potted African violet as a centerpiece. The trio talked and gossiped while they ate deep roast beef sandwiches and crunched raw vegetables. They drank cool lemonade and savored fresh potato salad; then the talking slowed as they lingered over pie and hot tea.

When they finished eating, Neal began to clean up and Katherine rose to help him. Helen felt the warm spring breeze on her cheeks and closed her eyes for a moment. "Alpha and I used to spend Sunday afternoons here in the park. When she became too ill to travel, we would reminisce together and share our favorite memories. This was a really good idea, Neal. Thank you."

"The day isn't finished you know. We can take all day to get home if we want. Is there anywhere else you would like to visit?"

Helen sighed. "No. I think this does it for me. I wouldn't want to tempt fate, you know. I feel really happy this minute."

Neal shrugged and carried the basket back to the car. When he returned, he put out his arm for Helen and walked her back to the car. The ground was uneven and soft in spots, so they took their time. Katherine followed the pair and noticed small violets peeking everywhere through the thick green grass in the clearing.

When they finally arrived at the parked car, Neal did not open the passenger door

as Helen expected him to. Instead he walked her around to the driver's side and opened the door. Helen was confused for a moment. "Aren't we on the wrong side of the car, Neal? I can't crawl across the seat, you know."

"I know, Queen E. But I believe you still know how to drive this old friend. Would you like to?"

Helen's eyes glistened. "Oh, Neal, could I? I mean, I don't even have a license anymore. I haven't driven at all in five years. Maybe I've forgotten how."

"I don't think so. I think your driving memory exists in your feet and your fingers and the seat of your pants. Do you want to give it a try? The roads in the park are easy and slow and this early in the season there's hardly anyone around. You could be chauffeur for Katherine and me. What do you think?"

Helen was already lifting her leg into the fine old Ford. "I think you two better climb aboard. Do you have the keys?"

"They're in the ignition, my dear. Just give us time to get in."

Katherine climbed into the back seat and Neal joined her. They smiled at each other and nestled back in the seat, as though they were relaxed. Neal watched every move Helen made in case she needed help of some kind, but so far her movements were confident and correct. She sat for a few moments and ran her hands across the large round steering wheel. Its chrome center was polished to a fine sheen and the white leather bands which formed its cover were worn from use, but clean. Helen remembered exactly how it felt to drive. She let her feet push the pedals to the floor and back up, so she could get a feel for their play. She adjusted the heavy old rearview mirror to an angle she could best use and noticed that Katherine and Neal seemed to be holding hands in the back seat. She smiled at this and rolled her window down. After about five minutes of these adjustments, she was ready to start the ignition.

Neal had done a great job keeping the motor in shape. It rumbled smoothly as various gauges on the panel came to life. Helen reached down and released the brake and

the old car rolled just a bit. Neal tensed for a few seconds, but Helen soon had control of the clutch and the accelerator. Although it had been years, she gently pulled the machine forward. She checked ahead to see where the narrow asphalt road turned and she pulled from the clearing parking lot onto it. Neal lifted Katherine's hand to his mouth and gently kissed it. She winked back at him as they began their motor tour of Blue Mountain State Park.

Katherine and Neal didn't speak, but listened instead to the running comments Helen was making. She was talking to the car as though becoming reacquainted with a relative she hadn't seen in years. She remembered the small tear in the leather seat on the passenger side and how she had made it while lifting a wooden crate of sports equipment into the car many years ago. She had a professional patch it, but the scar still lingered. She remembered her cross-country trips and parking in remote places to sleep for a few hours. Sometimes the night noises had frightened her and she would move on. Other times, the soft glow of dawn on her face would awaken her to remind her to continue her journey. Today, the journey was short, but sweet. The trees were fully green and the smell of fresh spring drifted into the open windows. Helen put her memories of the past three days into a vault in her mind and sealed them away. This memory would be the one she kept.

The three friends rode though the park twice before returning to the clearing where they started. Helen had encountered very little traffic and the ride itself was smooth and relaxing for the passengers. When they stopped, Helen waited for Neal to come around and help her step down from car. He walked her to the passenger side again, but before she got in Helen put her arms around Neal and hugged him gently. She held him for a few moments and thanked him for the lovely afternoon. Katherine was moved to tears by this, so she looked away to give them privacy.

Helen, however, wanted Katherine to be part of her joy. After thanking Neal, she reached out her hand to Katherine. Katherine walked over and Helen took both her hands

and held them closely. "Katherine, I know the next few weeks will be difficult ones for everybody, but today was a perfect thought and I know you took part in it. You and Neal seem to work very well together. That's not easy to find, you know."

Katherine squeezed Helen's hand. "I really hope that the whole thing blows over and you are living your life in peace by this time next month. I'm doing what I can to help you, but sometimes things are beyond our control, like what happened this week."

Helen stopped her. "Please don't talk to me about that ever again. It's history and I'm fine and I've chosen to forget it happened. Now, shouldn't we head home? I'd like to get back in time to have supper at the Black Forest."

"O.K. I'll help you climb in."

Neal went around the front of the car and climbed into the driver's side. He started the car as Katherine got settled in the back seat and all three of them took a last look at the picnic clearing in the late afternoon shadows. No one said much on the way back as Helen dozed off occasionally for a car catnap.

Liz Hurley sprang up from the lime vinyl couch to catch Mary Yoder before she got too far down the hall. "Mary. Come back, quick! They just pulled in. Helen's back!"

Agnes Snyder and Sue Wagner were seated in the other lime sofa and Clara Simmons sat beside Liz. The group had planted themselves in the lobby over an hour ago, hoping to see Helen arrive. They knew Neal had offered to pick her up from the hospital and word was out that he had gone over in Helen's car. The women wondered if there would be visible signs of Helen spending three days in the loony bin.

Agnes was certain that she probably got shock treatments, because she had a cousin years ago who went to Madison and that's what they did to her. She added some details to provoke interest. "They tie your tongue down so you don't swallow it and you

get burn marks on your head where the electricity goes in. Your body goes all stiff and you shake all over afterwards. My cousin never was the same, you know. I'll bet that's what they did to Helen. She'll probably need help walking in. Maybe Neal will have to carry her."

Mary tried to calm the hysteria. "Really, Agnes, I think they stopped doing that years ago. And Helen hasn't been diagnosed with anything, as far as I know. They only wanted to examine her for three days. She'll be fine, I'm sure."

Clara didn't agree this time. "I think they probably found something, if you ask me. She's pretty strange. I think all those years living out East did things to her. She doesn't understand how normal people live. Did you know she doesn't have a television? I don't think she knows anything about what happens in the world."

Sue Wagner felt the same way. "I know she never goes to church. How are they going to hold a proper funeral for her? She doesn't have a pastor or children and I hear she hasn't saved enough money to bury herself. I know her niece will have to cover it. Helen's been a real problem for her family, and to think how respectable Ann is. It's a shame, really. Maybe the judge will help her out."

Agnes supported that notion. "I think the sooner they can get somebody to take care of her, the better."

At that point Mary had heard all she wanted to and got up to leave. As soon as she turned the corner to go down the hall, Liz called her back to witness Helen's arrival.

Neal stopped the car at the entry and walked around to open the door for Helen, who descended from the vehicle with as much grace and dignity as she could muster in the face of the audience watching her from the foyer. She could see the women inside whispering to each other as she approached the building. Katherine walked at her side and gave a cool look to the women in the foyer. Mary Yoder broke from the group and held the door open for Helen to enter.

Mary spoke first. "Hello, Helen. It's nice to see you again, Katherine. How was

your trip home? It's been a beautiful day here."

Helen answered and smiled at Mary. "This has indeed been a beautiful day. It's been years since I enjoyed myself so much."

Mary had not expected this response after the week Helen had. "Well, I'm glad to hear that. Is there anything you need after being gone? I can run to the market and get bread or juice or milk for you."

"Thank you, Mary. That's kind of you, but I'll be just fine. Katherine told me Sheila plans to come by this evening and she usually has those things for me. I think I'll just take a little nap until she gets here."

Helen and Katherine walked silently between the women in the lobby and turned the corner into the hall. Neal parked Helen's car and went to his place to check the messages on his answering machine.

When they were alone again, the women made their observations. Agnes was not convinced that Helen felt as good as she looked. "I think she's trying to cover what they did to her over there. They probably gave her medication so she thinks she's O.K. She'll probably wake up screaming in the middle of the night and get us all out of bed."

Clara agreed. "We should all just keep an eye on her for awhile."

Mary shook her head without speaking and went back to her apartment.

Sue invited the other women to her apartment to watch *Wheel of Fortune* and they all accepted. Clara wanted to go to her kitchen first, though, to get them something to snack on while they watched it. She thought she had some chips and dip left over from her Thursday night card club.

Neal was invigorated by how the timing of all this seemed like destiny of some kind. He was not particularly superstitious, but the way the pieces of his life were suddenly fitting together felt to him like incredibly good luck.

He heard the door open behind him and walked over to greet the two men from the tribe. They were dressed in business suits and were standing in awe of the vast open space before them. Neal reached out his hand to shake theirs and they all walked to the

center of the main floor.

Chief Broad River spoke first. "This building is far more open than I had expected. Was this area always without walls or did you pull them down?"

Neal shook his head and explained. "This large open area is exactly the way it's been since the factory was built. At one time it was filled end to end with various industrial machines and the people who operated them. Skilled toolmakers, mostly. As you can imagine, it was noisy and difficult to maintain an even temperature. But it functioned very well for its purpose. The row of offices above were added later, but that's the only structural change I'm aware of. I have the plans laid out in

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Neal turned on all the lights in the huge vacant space. At night in the artificial light, layers of old dust mixed with the residue of oil and made the factory feel even more desolate. He was meeting with a representative of the Missitami Tribe of Lower Wisconsin at 9:00 to walk through the site. They hoped a meeting at night would draw less attention to their activity. Certain Winterborne citizens would not be happy about this prospective real estate transaction. Tribal leaders had approached him months ago with an initial offer, but Neal didn't know if he was ready to sell. But now, he was more than ready. As he anticipated moving to South Carolina, he was getting excited again about looking forward to challenges ahead. He had notified a real estate broker that he wanted to liquidate all his rental properties after his accountant gave him the best timetable for accomplishing minimum capital gains on the transactions. In selling this building to the Native Americans, the state of Wisconsin would be willing to negotiate certain tax advantages for him. Neal was invigorated by how the timing of all this seemed like destiny of some kind. He was not particularly superstitious, but the way the pieces of his life were suddenly fitting together felt to him like incredibly good luck.

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"Thank you. We would like that very much."

The three walked up the metal stairs to the first office, where Neal had placed a drawing board, conference table and four comfortable chairs. He started the coffeepot and adjusted the lights above the drawing board which held the blueprints. The two visitors looked through the floor plans and commented on various specs. Every few minutes they would walk back out on the metal landing and survey a portion of the building they had just read about in the plans. Neal kept their coffee cups full and after an hour of this research and conversation together, the two Indians approached Neal with a request.

Chief Broad River spoke for them again. "So far we very much like what we see. We have a few questions about possible possession dates and zoning regulations, if you don't mind."

Neal smiled and invited them to be seated at the table. He provided them with legal pads for notes and asked them to begin their questions.

"First, we know that we have had lots of trouble even looking at properties in Winterborne. You have been very generous in that regard. However our obvious next

fear is that local ordinances, already in place, will block us from putting a casino at this location. Do you know anything about such matters?"

"Well, I took the liberty of checking that out in some detail after you made this appointment. I found that because of the EPA findings, future industrial expansion is out of the question. In these situations, alternative land use is recommended by the federal government for properties already in place. We qualify under that stipulation as a "secondary use". Given the nature of your situation, with the state now recognizing your historical land rights, it seems likely that the federal and state governments will see this as an opportunity to meet community and tribal needs efficiently. It's good PR for the government types and spin doctors for local candidates are going to love this way to solve our industrial environmental problems. However, with so many people using the site, there may be some impact on local water and sewage as well as town security. But overall, I think we'll get state support for this one. I'm willing to risk it."

"I'd hoped you'd say something like that. This evening my reaction to this site is very positive. I'll call you early next week and let you know for sure."

Neal had not expected this firm an answer so early. "I'm glad you like it. If you have any more questions, don't hesitate to call. And if you want to move forward, I can get my lawyer to draw up some initial contracts by the end of the week."

They shook hands and then descended the stairs to the main floor, where they discussed how the space might most effectively be used for a casino. They then went outside and walked the perimeter of the large parking area. The tribe members commented on how easy it would be to accommodate tour busses, both for access and parking. Neal then walked them to their car and returned to the building to turn off the lights and lock up.

Katherine had tried to reach him Saturday night, but he wasn't home. So she

waited until 7:00 in the morning on Sunday and finally he answered the phone. "Neal, this is Katherine. Did I wake you?"

Neal was still in bed, but he had been dozing off and on for about a half hour.

"Not exactly. It's good to hear your voice first thing in the morning. In fact I was thinking of you when you called. Is anything wrong? It's pretty early for a social call."

Katherine relaxed when she heard his light tone. "No, nothing's wrong exactly, but I can't get Helen off my mind. Can I see you sometime today to talk about it?"

"Of course you can. You probably shouldn't come here, though. You've become a pretty regular guest of mine and believe me, the neighbors will notice."

Katherine laughed. "Name a place and a time. I'll be there."

"O.K. How about 10:00 at the factory? I want to talk to you about it anyway."

"I'll be there. Should I bring anything?"

"Just yourself. See you then."

Katherine hadn't realized how remote an industrial park can feel on a Sunday morning. The large parking areas behind the plants were vacant, except for security staff cars and company vehicles. The usual bustle of trucks and cars and people outside had disappeared. It reminded her of how ghost towns were presented in black and white Westerns she had watched as a young girl. She expected tumbleweed to drift by at any moment.

Neal waited for her as she drove into the parking lot at the Harrison Tool Company building. She was curious about why he was waiting outside. He walked over to her car and took her hand after she parked. She smiled and asked, "Where are we going? The back door is the other way. Are you taking me in another entrance?"

Neal led her toward the gravel road behind the parking lot. "No. We'll go in the usual door in a little bit. First, I want to show you something."

Katherine was intrigued by the mystery and simply followed him. They crossed the road and walked for about forty yards along a deep ditch. Trash had collected here over the years, with no one bothering to remove it. Katherine worried about rodents and other creatures that probably lived in the ditch.

Neal noticed her concern and tried to reassure her. "It's not much further, I promise. I want to show you the local problem that could help make me a wealthy man."

"What? I'm afraid you've lost me. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I know. That's why we're here. I'm about to tell you a story you might like."

They suddenly came upon an overgrown pond. The water moved slightly, so there was no apparent moss or other signs of stagnation. The sun reflecting from it made it look like a natural haven for wildlife, but it was oddly bereft of birds.

Suddenly Katherine knew where she was. "This is the contaminated water area, isn't it? This is why no new factories can be built here. So why can't they just clean it up?"

"Oh, clean-up isn't the priority here. It's keeping the problem contained to this site. The real problem has to do with underground reservoirs and connecting underground waterways. So far, the problem is local and will dissipate over time. However, with the geological terrain beneath us, the threat to Winterborne and other communities downstream is acute. This was a horrible place to put an industrial subdivision. Lots of money was lost here by local land speculators. Just listen to the whining at the Club sometime."

"But why did you bring me here? What's going on that you haven't told me?"

"It's one of those possible options I mentioned to you when we talked about my moving on. I couldn't say anything to you then, because it was still so preliminary, but I can tell you now. I'm about to sell my Harrison property and the deal is golden. These buyers are desperate for a site and you know how real estate is - for certain locations, no price is too high."

They were walking back to the plant as they talked, but Katherine suddenly stopped in her tracks. "It's the casino, isn't it? You're selling your factory to the Missitami's and then you're leaving town. Neal, how long have you been planning this?"

Neal blushed. "Wait a minute. It's not like you just made it sound. They came to me months ago, but I had no idea then that I might be ready to sell. Excuse me, Katherine, but you are part of the reason I feel so restless all of a sudden. And I don't personally feel like this is a bad thing to do to the town. There's lots of hopelessness setting in around here, in case you haven't noticed. I'm helping to bring some new life to Winterborne."

For the first time since she met him, Katherine was annoyed with Neal. "Life? For who? I'm not sure that's what a gambling casino will do. Have you thought this through?"

Neal was more than a little surprised at Katherine's reaction to his good news. "Yes. I've given it a lot of thought and I reached my own conclusions, which seem to differ dramatically from yours. Have you thought this through yourself?"

"Of course I haven't. You just told me about it. But I do read, you know, and from what I've read gambling isn't the answer to any town's problems. It just adds to them."

Neal turned back toward the gravel road as Katherine followed him. "Well they aren't exactly opening the casino on Main Street. Access to the industrial park is direct from the Interstate. They planned it that way for truck traffic. Now out-of-town gamblers can slip in and out, unnoticed for the most part. And who knows? Maybe some local shops and restaurants will benefit from extra customers and I'm sure the Missitami Tribe will employ some local people."

Katherine didn't like talking to Neal's back as they walked. "That speech sounds like you've practiced it. Who else have you had to sell the idea to? Does anyone know what you're doing?"

and we Neal stopped and turned around. "I wish you would stop making it sound like I'm doing something illegal. I'm not, you know, and there are certain people in the state who would consider me a hero. Nobody else in town will give the Missitami Tribe a shot at this thing. And why not? I don't see it as much worse than what's happening here already. Has your community-minded husband told his employees that they will be out of work by fall?"

She stopped in her tracks to answer him. "Stephen has nothing to do with this. It's an entirely different situation and you know it."

Neal turned on his heel and moved forward again. "O.K. I know it. Well, here we are back at the plant. Do you still want to come inside? We haven't said anything about Helen."

Katherine was walking toward her car. "I don't think so, Neal. I really need to think a little about what you just told me. It's such a new idea and I'm not sure how I feel about it. I think I'll go home and call Molly. They got back from their trip yesterday and I'm sure she has some wonderful stories to share with me. I'll call you later today."

Neal walked to her car and leaned in the window as she put the key in the ignition. "I really think you should reconsider your position on this one. Maybe you do need a little time to think about it. I'm not out to harm anyone, Katherine. I believe I'm doing the right thing."

"I know. I'm just surprised I guess. Like I said, I'll call you later. 'Bye.'"

"Good-bye, Katherine. I hope you have a nice visit with Molly. I know you've missed her."

"Thanks, Molly. That sounds perfect. Enjoy brunch and say 'Hi' to everyone for me. Stephen should be home next weekend and maybe we can join you at the club then."

Molly sounded relaxed and happy. "Phil and I had the best time. We explored everything on the wharf and drove around the bay area. We found some of the most wonderful jazz spots and the seafood was amazing. We slept 'til noon if we wanted to

and we walked around holding hands. You know, Katherine, in some ways it was just as well that you and Stephen couldn't join us, after all. We only had each other to talk to and I really like Phil. I think that's a good thing to know on your twenty-fifth anniversary, don't you?"

Katherine laughed at Molly's revelation. "Molly, you make it sound like you just discovered you enjoy Phil's company. I thought the two of you always got along splendidly. Why are you so surprised?"

"I don't know exactly. I think it had to do with being so far away, alone together. We usually take trips with family or friends or we make a point of getting to know people we meet. We were only interested in each other this time. It was like dating. You really ought to try it, Katherine."

"Maybe I'll do that, Molly. It sounds intriguing - sort of like one of those marriage encounter weekends without all the workshop atmosphere. I'm so glad you had fun."

Molly chuckled and continued. "So what happened here while I was gone? Anything new on the Helen front? Are you almost finished with your report? That court date is just a couple weeks away, isn't it?"

Katherine wasn't sure which of Molly's questions to answer first. "Actually Molly, I'd like to tell you all about it in person. What are you doing this afternoon?"

Molly thought for a moment. "Well, we're joining Max and Simone for brunch at the club, but we should be finished by 1:00 or so. I can drive my own car and leave from there. How does 1:30 sound?"

"Thanks, Molly. That sounds perfect. Enjoy brunch and say 'Hi' to everyone for me. Stephen should be home next weekend and maybe we can join you at the club then. But this Sunday, I'm on my own. See you later."

Katherine chuckled. "What it is, is Helen is a cantankerous independent eccentric old woman. She doesn't reach out to her neighbors to find friends and she's stubborn. I

Katherine had mint tea waiting when Molly arrived. She carried it into the living room on a tray and the two women got comfortable in the huge stuffed chairs which flanked the fireplace. Molly was her usual perky self and Katherine felt relieved to be able to share the afternoon with her, instead of dwelling on problems all by herself.

Molly jumped right into it. "So tell me all about Helen. Is she more cooperative than she was when I left?"

Katherine shook her head. "Not exactly. Judge Matthews decided to send her to Madison State Hospital last week, to have her evaluated. I wish she had gone to my doctor when I made that appointment. It might have saved her from being kidnapped."

Molly choked on her tea. "Did you say kidnapped? What do you mean? Is she O.K.?"

"She seems to be fine now, but two guys grabbed her out of the Smiling Seniors parking lot Tuesday evening to take her to the hospital. The court order gave them the right to keep her for seventy-two hours against her will. It sounds like they didn't learn much, though. She says she didn't talk to any of them."

"Wow. I never heard of anything like that. Can they do that to anybody?"

"I guess so, if they get a court order they can."

Molly shook her head and put her tea glass down. "I'm not sure I want to be an advocate for the court after all. I didn't know things like that were involved. Maybe I'll volunteer to read stories to children instead."

"You could be on to something there. But I'm really glad I am involved. I think I may be able to help Helen. I mean, I am the only person working on this who doesn't have a personal interest in the outcome. I know I've made my own decision about whether or not she needs a guardian."

"So, what is it?"

Katherine chuckled. "What it is, is Helen is a cantankerous independent eccentric old woman. She doesn't reach out to her neighbors to find friends and she's stubborn. I

don't think any of that means she needs a guardian to look after her. I hope I can make that point when I write my report and testify at the hearing."

Molly tucked her legs under her and leaned toward Katherine. "Are you really sure? I mean, you can like somebody and still they need help, you know."

"You're right. I like Helen. But it's more than that. There are specific things about her that make me feel that she's doing O.K. on her own. They say she's not handling her money very well. But her rent is paid every month on time. She pays Sheila for her meals and a little housekeeping. Her car insurance is up to date and she has no debt. I know she sends several hundred dollars a month to her niece and she has no savings account, but I'm not sure that defines Helen as unstable."

"Did you say 'car'? I thought Helen walked all over town. Why does she need to pay car insurance?"

"Oh, I guess you didn't know. She has a beautiful antique car that she drove for years. She doesn't drive it anymore, but she keeps it parked at the apartment complex. She can have one space there because it goes with the rent, so she likes to look out the window at it. I'll take you over and show it to you sometime."

Molly thought for a moment and then asked, "But what about the other stuff people say about her? I mean, it's not exactly normal for a ninety-three year old woman to walk all over town, especially during Wisconsin winters."

Katherine sat at the edge of her seat and smiled at Molly. "But it *is* absolutely normal for Helen. She's always been really active. She coached as well as taught at that girls' school. She likes to keep moving and she believes it keeps her healthy and fit. She may be right. She did bounce back from that cold or whatever she had last month. I agree that sometimes it looks reckless to be out there in the snow, but I hope at that age I still have the option of being reckless sometimes. Helen is not a child, after all."

"I know. But still . . ."

"But still what? So far she's managed to get to town and back every day for years."

Helen's a public embarrassment to Ann, but aside from that she's absolutely harmless. I know the judge will think so too, once he hears my report."

"I really hope so, for your sake as much as hers. You've put a lot of time and energy into this. I don't know if I would be so dedicated to it. After all, you could be spending your days in Chicago right now, instead of chasing around Winterborne asking questions about some old lady."

"Molly, you may be right about not being an advocate after all. Reading stories to little children may be better suited to your interests. Speaking of which, how are your grandchildren?"

Molly brightened even more than usual. "Oh, Scotty's getting so excited about starting kindergarten and little Brianna has just started walking. Scotty can't decide if he's happy about that or not, since she's begun to get into his things. Being Big Brother is lots more fun when Little Sister is confined to a crib."

The women laughed about the foibles of sibling rivalry and poured themselves more tea. Katherine changed the subject again by asking Molly, "Say, did you hear anything about the Missitami Indian tribe opening a casino in Winterborne? They were talking about it at the club last week and it was the first I'd heard of it."

"Oh, yeah, Phil said something about that. I don't think the city council is too happy about the prospect, except I guess there's pretty good tax money in it if they can develop the right ordinance. I don't know, sounds like a lot of fun to me."

"It does? Aren't you worried about what it might do to the town?"

"I would hope it makes people smile more. Winters can be pretty grim around here, so sure it sounds like fun. Phil and I get to Vegas at least once a year and it's a hoot. We never win or lose very much. It's just a different way to pass the time. Why do you ask? Does the idea bother you?"

"I think so. I mean, I've read some stuff on it and it can change the character of a whole community. Does Winterborne want to be a magnet for crime?"

spoken "Oh. I thought we were talking about regular people just spending some time and money on cards and stuff. I didn't know gangsters were coming to town."

house. "Well, it just seems like people shouldn't risk their hard-earned money that way. The house always wins, you know."

Molly smiled and shook her head. "You kill me sometimes, Katherine. Why do you think most of the guys at the club hone their golf skills? They aren't just jocks, you know. Phil has lost hundreds of dollars on a bad afternoon with the wrong foursome. And what about football and horse racing and even the stock market? People gamble all the time. Why not a casino?"

around Katherine sat back and smiled at Molly. "Sometimes you make a lot of sense for someone who thinks of herself as an airhead."

"Airhead? Thanks a lot. I am a college graduate you know. I just like to enjoy myself. Life's too short - which reminds me - I've had enough of this tea. It's mid-afternoon. Let's make some Margaritas and toast some nachos. What do you say, Madame Advocate?"

we split "I say I'm really glad to have you back, Molly. I missed you and Margaritas sound perfect. I even have some real limes in the refrigerator."

weekend Molly called Phil to come for her at about 7:00. The women had finished a whole pitcher of Margaritas and Molly decided it would be safer if she didn't drive home. Katherine waved good-bye to them and remembered she had promised to call Neal. Just as she got to the phone in the living room, it rang.

She sat down and took a deep breath before answering. "Hello, this is Katherine Mitchell."

ring. "Hi, Honey. I didn't catch you in the middle of anything, did I? I mean, I can call back later if I did." Stephen wasn't sure how to begin this conversation, since they hadn't

spoken since their fight on Thursday night.

"No. I'm not in the middle of anything at all anymore. I'm just sitting around the house, feeling a little loaded."

"Loaded?"

"Yup. Drunk. Tipsy. Filled to the brim with tequila. Molly just left after we had a grand giggly time together. It felt good to have her around again. By the way, she and Phil really enjoyed San Francisco. It sounds like it's a good thing we couldn't join them. They second-honeymooned."

Stephen laughed. "Gee, Katherine is that a word? You do sound a little loose around the edges, but I'm glad you had fun. You need to find more things like that to lift your spirits while I'm away."

"I'll look into that, Stephen. Maybe tonight. I'll make some phone calls."

"Maybe you ought to wait 'til morning for that, Dear. You sound like you've had all the fun you can manage for one day. Have you eaten anything?"

Katherine nodded as she replied. "Yup. Molly and I had piles of nachos and then we split a lemon meringue pie. I'm stuffed and guilty and a little sleepy."

"Well then, I think I'll let you go. There's not much new going on with me. The plans for the move are coming along and the Bulls game was worth staying in town for. I'll call you tomorrow and maybe we can make some plans with Phil and Molly for the weekend. I'm sure they're excited about telling us all the details of their trip. Good-night, Katherine."

"Good-night, Stephen. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Katherine hung up the phone and dialed Neal's number. He answered on the first ring. "Hullo Neal. It's me. Is there any chance you can come to my house?"

Neal hadn't expected this invitation. "Are you sure, Katherine? I thought we just

had a fight and my coming to your place seems like a lot of risk to me. What will the neighbors say?"

"Oh yeah, the neighbors. Screw the neighbors. Come visit me, Neal."

"Have you been drinking?"

"A little. Molly just left and we had a couple Margaritas. You know, to wet down the nachos." Katherine sat up straight to keep her voice clear.

Neal chuckled. "I think I'll pass on your generous invitation tonight Katherine, as tempting as it sounds. Can I see you tomorrow instead? I have some work to do at the apartments, but I should be free by 6:00. We could meet somewhere."

Katherine pouted and slumped back into the chair. "O.K. spoil-sport. And I'm sorry about the fight. Molly helped set me straight about casinos. She can be really smart sometimes. You have no idea what kind of action you're missing tonight, though. I had such plans."

"I'm sure you did and I'm really sorry to decline, but my best judgment tells me to be more careful. Trust me. You'll be happy about this in the morning. Think about tomorrow though, and thanks for listening to Molly's casino speech. I bet she'd be surprised to know she's become my advocate. I'll imagine you in your hot bath tonight and I'll call you in the morning. Good-night, Katherine."

"Good-night, Neal," Katherine hung-up the phone and started upstairs, following Neal's suggestion for a hot long bath.

Katherine drove up to the fishing cabin at 6:30, where Neal had started a fire and grilled burgers for them. Katherine's famous pasta salad and sliced tomatoes made the meal a feast. They ate outside and then walked down to the lake to watch the sun set. Green leaves hung heavy on the huge old trees in the yard and dandelions claimed huge sections of the bumpy lawn. A faint fishy smell drifted toward them from the lake and

mosquitoes buzzed around their faces, but Neal and Katherine enjoyed the immense quiet of the evening approaching as they sat on some large rocks at the edge of the water.

Katherine sighed and brought up the subject they had avoided until now. "The court date is only a couple of weeks away, you know. My report is basically done and I plan to turn it in Friday. Judge Matthews said he wanted some time to look it over before the hearing. I hope I made my observations clear and didn't forget anything important."

"Are you worried? I know you tried to be objective, but wasn't part of your job to be an advocate? I mean, everybody knows what Ann wants. You need to point out the other side, if there is one. We haven't really talked about it. Do you think Helen needs a guardian?"

Katherine pulled back and looked at him, surprised at the question. "Neal, where have you been? You know I think they should just leave her in peace. She's a little weird, but I don't think she needs a keeper. How can you even ask me that?"

Neal smiled and shook his head as he pulled clover from the grass. "I asked only because I never had before. I didn't want to just read your mind. You said what I thought you would, so now it's official. By the way, I couldn't agree with you more. Sometimes I wish we could find someone in Boston who would take her in, so she could finish her days in peace. That's not possible, though. I tried once, you know. It was all dead-ends."

"You did? When? Who did you contact? I've thought about doing that myself."

"Oh, it was months ago. Before all this court stuff happened. I started by calling the school where she worked. Her name was familiar to them and they even directed me to a couple of her old students who worked there, but nobody had been close enough to her to take such a large step. They did give me the names of some senior housing places, however, in case she wanted to move back."

Katherine was excited about that idea. "Did you find a place? I mean, there's public housing and senior housing all over. That's a good idea. Would she go?"

Neal put up his hand in a "Stop" signal. "Whoa, Katherine. Don't get too excited. Helen put a lid on the idea. She said she planned to finish her days in Winterborne and that she didn't want to exchange one group of strange neighbors for another. I still have the list of places I found, but they're useless without her cooperation. She does shoot herself in the foot sometimes."

"I've noticed that." Katherine stood up to return to the cabin. She reached down to take Neal's hand and they turned to climb the steep bank together as the last sliver of sun disappeared behind them.

On Tuesday, Katherine decided to read her report in fine detail before submitting it to Judge Matthews. She wanted to see if she had forgotten to contact any of the people in town who knew Helen. She decided to call Mary Yoder one last time to see if she had missed any connections at the apartment complex. Mary said she would be happy to talk to her and invited her to supper on Wednesday evening.

Katherine looked forward to this evening with Mary. Of all the women she had encountered at the Smiling Seniors complex, Mary seemed more approachable and friendly than most. Tonight Mary was dressed in her usual attire, a soft running suit. It was bright red and had a large embroidered flower on the front. She invited Katherine to be seated at her small kitchen table and brought her a glass of pink lemonade.

Mary sat across from Katherine and got directly to the point. "I guess you're here to talk some more about Helen. We've got a few minutes until the chicken casserole is done, so we can start right now. What would you like to know?"

"Well, I guess I want to make sure I haven't missed anything, before I turn in my report. Are there any other people in the building I should talk to?"

Mary smiled and shook her head. "Naw, I wouldn't bother if I were you. You're probably going to hear the same story over and over. Most people will tell you that

Helen is crazy and needs someone to look after her, for her own good." Mary meant.

"Is that what you think?" #1: A woman is put here by God to produce children

"Me? Oh, I think she's a little goofy and should do a lot of things different than she does, but even at that I'd probably let her keep making her own mistakes. Only problem is I'm not exactly speaking for the rest of them, you know." me. Even so, many

"Who does speak for them?" of the v... very complex and successful lives while following

Mary paused and thought about that. "Well, I'm not sure there's anybody like that. Maybe if I told you a little about each of them, you'd see how they just form a general opinion together. Mostly they decide things out in the lobby while they wait for the mail." Katherine was surprised at that description. "How do you mean that? How is she

Katherine had taken out her notebook and started to write Mary's comments. "Is Helen the topic of conversation a lot?" paying... made her pay by making her crazy in the end. She

"Yes and no. Part of it isn't what Helen does, but what she doesn't do. Most people living here have had the same kinds of lives. They know the rules and they follow them." someone doesn't do what she should with her life. Now they hope Ann can protect

"Rules? Like apartment regulations?" her, the... years. Ann is her last family member in

Mary chuckled. "My, no. The important rules. The ones nobody ever writes down." town, s... happens to the loony old lady. Oops. There goes the timer. Our supper is

"What do you mean?" ready."

"Well, first let me describe most of the women who live here. They've lived in or near Winterborne most of their lives. They can tell you about the winter storm of '68 and the flood in '72 that wiped out most of the crops that year. They'll tell you details about the births of each of their children and how old their grandchildren were when they got their first tooth. They know the price of ground beef and how long a pound of butter will last before it goes bad. Many of them didn't finish high school, because they quit to help with family or get married themselves." back where it's warm and dry. But I don't.

"So what does that have to do with these 'rules' you were talking about?" Nobody... gardian

Katherine had stopped taking notes and was trying to figure out what Mary meant.

"O.K. I'll back up. Rule #1: A woman is put here by God to produce children with the man she marries and create a comfortable household for that family to live in. I think there's some German phrase they use to describe it. 'Kids and Kitchen', or something like that. The other rules for living come from that first one. Even so, many of the women who live here have had very complex and successful lives while following that rule. It gives them a lifetime of proud moments, built on child-rearing and family formation. Helen is a threat and a mystery to them. She broke rule #1 and now is paying for it."

Katherine was surprised at that description. "How do you mean that? How is she 'paying for it' and to whom?"

Mary chuckled. "Oh, God's made her pay by making her crazy in the end. She didn't follow the rule of getting married. She didn't produce and sustain a child. She actually lived with a woman instead of a man. They pity her and see how things turn out when someone doesn't do what she should with her life. Now they hope Ann can protect her, the way a man should have done all those years. Ann is her last family member in town, so that's her duty. They hope Ann can come to the rescue before something really dreadful happens to the loony old lady. Oops. There goes the timer. Our supper is ready."

Katherine sat and absorbed what Mary had just said. She had been so matter-of-fact, like Katherine should have seen this all along. She decided to ask one last question while Mary set the table. "Mary, is that what you think, too? Do you believe that Helen needs to be protected by her family from herself?"

"Oh, sometimes I do. Like on those cold winter mornings when I see Helen walking out into the snow. I never know if she'll live through the day. I admit my heart goes out to her and I want to bring her back where it's warm and dry. But I don't. Nobody does and I think we feel guilty about it. At least if Ann becomes her guardian

we can all breath a little easier this winter."

Katherine helped finish the table and they ate Mary's wonderful chicken casserole, while making small talk about the flowers and trees and various rock formations that were part of Neal's landscape design for the complex. Katherine washed dishes with Mary and thanked her for all her help. She then drove home and decided to work on some details in her report. She wanted to emphasize even more how full and important Helen's teaching career had been to her and how Helen had come back to Winterborne only to care for her ailing sister. Katherine suddenly felt strongly that the judge had to remember this part of Helen's personal history while reading about her current situation.

The judge was waiting in his office when Katherine arrived. He rose to greet her and invited her to sit in one of the comfortable leather chairs in front of his massive desk. He had a few files piled in the corner of the desktop, but otherwise the entire work area was clear of clutter. The judge had a reputation for making fair decisions in a timely way. He was organized to a fault and didn't care for sloppiness in his court or his mind. His questions were usually direct and purposeful. Katherine hoped this tendency would benefit Helen's case.

He noticed the thick file Katherine had laid across her lap. "Is that your report?" Katherine passed it across the desk to him. "Yes, sir. I hope it serves the purpose explained to me in my training."

"Oh I'm sure you did just fine, Katherine. This program was established to gather information that might not be available otherwise, so the format isn't as important as your ability to observe and explain what you see. This one seems longer than many of them have been. You must have worked very hard on it. I want to thank you, on behalf of the court, for your willingness to volunteer your time this way."

"I appreciate that. It did turn out to be more complicated than I first imagined and I thought I would feel happy when I finished, but I feel worried instead. I'm concerned that maybe I missed something or maybe I should have talked to some other people."

The judge nodded and smiled knowingly. "That response happens a lot. I think it's probably true for anybody whose work affects the fate of another person. You know, lawyers can dwell on certain cases for months and then wonder what went wrong when they lose. That's why it's so important to find people willing to take the risk. Not everyone is up to the task Katherine, and I mean it when I say I'm grateful. Whatever the outcome, I know that you gave this your best effort."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Your support helped me with the questions for me, or do I just leave the report for you to read?"

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"Your support helped me a lot. Do you have any questions for me, or do I just leave the report for you to read?"

Judge Matthews placed the document on the pile of files on his desk. "Actually, I may call you before the hearing if I need any follow-up. That doesn't always happen though, so don't be concerned if you don't hear from me. It could mean you were so thorough that I had no questions."

Katherine rose to say good-bye and turned to leave the room, then paused to ask one last question. "I know that Ann has an attorney for the hearing. Should Helen have one?"

The judge leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "This isn't a trial. It's only a hearing to see if there is enough cause to make Ann the guardian. It's about presenting facts to the court to make an informed decision on behalf of the community. Usually these things are pretty routine. Do you see some problem?"

"I don't know for sure, but it just seems lopsided if Ann can bring a lawyer and Helen doesn't."

The judge thought for a moment before responding. "Well, I'll follow your instincts on this and Helen has the right to an attorney, of course. Just let my office know who she hires, so we can get the name into our records. It's less than two weeks though, so she'll have to hurry."

"Thanks, Judge Matthews. I'll talk to Helen today."

It was nearly 10:00 a.m., so Katherine drove over to the Black Forest to see if Helen had left yet. As she walked up to the restaurant, Katherine saw Helen seated at her window perch, so she waved at her through the glass. Helen perked up when she saw Katherine come inside and signaled to her to sit at her table. Sheila came right over and took Katherine's order for a cup of coffee and a Danish.

Helen and Katherine talked about the beautiful spring day and how many people were out and about for a Friday morning. Then Katherine brought up the subject most on her mind. "Helen, your court hearing is only ten days from now and I wondered if you had considered hiring a lawyer. I know some local people I could call for you, and I could even help with a retainer until your monthly check comes in."

Helen laughed lightly. "I'd wondered how long it would take you to come up with that idea. I have thought about it and I've decided not to hire one. At this point in my life, I'll just take what comes and hope the court decides on its own that Ann should leave me alone."

"But a lawyer would know more about how to ask the right questions to make sure that happens. It's what they do for a living. Please, let me call someone."

Helen looked out the window at people walking and talking and running personal errands. "No. I don't think so. I'm just afraid it would turn into a contest of proving who's crazier, Ann or me. I don't know if Ann realizes that a courtroom can peel back years of family secrets if an attorney is aggressive enough. She wants me off the streets to protect the Grant name. I don't want to make things worse for her by airing her dirty laundry in court, so no lawyers for me, Katherine."

Katherine suddenly wondered if she had covered anything close to the truth in her report. "You continue to surprise me, Helen. Would you like a ride back to your apartment?"

Helen reached for her cane, which was leaning against the wall near the window.

"Yes, Katherine. I feel a little tired this morning. A ride home would be wonderful."

Katherine paid Sheila and walked with Helen to the Lexus. She drove Helen around Winterborne before going back to the Smiling Seniors. The two women found interesting flower displays in neighborhood yards and Helen pointed out a fine old oak that had been hit by lightening and was dying in pieces. Katherine drove over a local bridge where a small creek had swollen with rain water and was roaring with the noise of a plunging river. When they returned to the apartment complex, Katherine looked around for Neal's truck, but it wasn't there. She let Helen off at the door and went home. She would call Neal later and let him know Helen's decision about hiring a lawyer.

Stephen came home a little early Friday evening. He said he was excited about cooking something on the grill after all that restaurant food in Chicago. He had called Amy to join them for one last meal together before she left on Monday for her summer in Spain. Katherine felt more relaxed than she had in weeks. For better or worse, her report was finished and in the judge's hands. She had found some fresh strawberries and decided to make shortcake with genuine whipped cream to top it off. She hadn't whipped cream in years and she hoped it turned out well. Katherine was pleased to have an evening when her main worry was as frivolous as whipping cream.

Amy was getting excited about the trip. "Mom, did you know that I can take three-day weekends all summer and travel around Europe? They set it up that way so students can explore the continent as well as study. They give you lists of people to stay with in different cities and they suggest places to go. Can I take your good camera, Dad? I want my pictures to be great."

Stephen had finished setting up his cooking equipment and was walking into the house to get the meat. "I don't know, Amy. You are known world-wide for losing track of things. Maybe you can get by with some disposables."

certain "Stop joking, Dad. I know you'll let me use it."

Stephen smiled and shook his head at Katherine, who was coming out the back door with a platter of steaks. "Do you remember Katherine, if I spoiled all my daughters this way or did I just get soft in my old age?"

home "Gee Stephen, let me think a minute. No, it's not the years. You've always free spoiled them rotten. I guess that's why they turned out so bad."

Amy laughed and nibbled on a celery stick. "I hope I turn out that bad. I mean, I don't even know what I'll be doing when I graduate. You already have a doctor and a teacher. Maybe I'll be a lifeguard or something and keep an eternal tan. How's that for a goal, Dad?"

surprise Stephen walked over and put his arm around her shoulder. "Your goals are my goals, Amy. I just never want to see you unhappy. I think it's those beautiful teeth I paid all that money for. You must keep smiling to guarantee my investment."

They ate outside, under the shade of a large maple tree, and happily fought the flies for their food. Stephen shared his excitement over the Puerto Rico plans. "You know, Amy, after your summer in Spain you'll speak the language pretty well. How would you like to look for work in Puerto Rico after you graduate next year? You wouldn't even need to live with us. I'm sure we could find you a little place all your own. Don't you think that would be great, Katherine?"

week Katherine looked at Amy's surprised face and replied, "Gee, Stephen, I think you gave Amy a new idea to think about. I doubt if she could give you an answer today."

I talked Stephen poured himself more iced tea. "Oh, I didn't expect an answer today, Katherine. I just want to give her something to consider while she's away."

Amy shrugged. "I guess I could think about it. I mean, so far I don't know what I want to do when I finish at Madison. That's pretty far away though and a lot can happen in a year, you know."

for Katherine chuckled. "A lot can change in four short months. At Christmas, I

certainly couldn't have predicted everything that's happened in my life this spring."

Stephen agreed. "Oh, I know. What with my Chicago trip and the new business partnership and now our move to Puerto Rico, it's been an exciting year for us so far. And it's going to continue to get better, Katherine. You're going to love our new sunny home and all the new friends you're bound to make. I'll be glad when you're finally free of this court thing that's kept you here."

"That may not have been the only thing keeping me here, you know."

Stephen had a far-away look in his eyes. "Can you imagine it, Katherine? A sunny blue sky stretching for miles to a horizon of ocean water and nothing but warm weather. I won't be able to drag you back here. Just wait and see, Katherine. You'll be surprised how much you'll love it."

"I hope so, Dear. Now Amy, do we need to do any shopping before your trip? Molly is back in town and the three of us could go to the mall tomorrow, if you like."

Amy perked up at the sound of shopping. "Oh, could we? I was afraid to ask, because of the cost of the trip already and all the other stuff going on right now. Maybe we could even find some things for you to take to Puerto Rico with you next month. You'll need a wide straw hat to keep all that hot sun off your delicate neck."

"I'll go give Molly a call right now and see if she's free. Did you want me to ask her about tomorrow night at the Club, too, Stephen? You had mentioned it earlier in the week, but I hadn't asked if you still wanted to do dinner with them."

Stephen was cleaning up the grill. "Sure. Sounds great. It feels like forever since I talked to Phil. Maybe we can get them to visit us in Puerto Rico while we're down there, a long weekend or something."

Monday morning, Stephen left for Chicago early in the morning and left a note for Katherine. He reminded her that he would not be home the next weekend, because he

and Paul were flying to Puerto Rico to direct the first steps in setting up the new plant. He told her he would call before he left and thanked her for such a fun weekend.

Katherine read the note and made some coffee before calling Neal. He wasn't there when she called, so she left word on his machine. She had filled the dishwasher, gotten dressed and paid some bills before Neal returned her call. Katherine was happy to hear his voice. "Hi, Katherine. What's up?"

"Well, I turned in my report to Judge Matthews Friday and I wanted to check with you before the hearing. Do you know if they want you to testify? I got a subpoena last Thursday. All court advocates testify at the hearings so I wasn't surprised, but I didn't know for sure who else had been called."

"Actually I got mine just this morning. They caught me before I left the building. My past experiences with the court have not been jolly, so I hope this doesn't hurt too much."

"Past experiences? I'd like to hear about them. Do you have any time this week?"

Neal paused as he went over his calendar in his head. "Sadly, things are starting to stack up for me. I have meetings today with Chief Broad River and his group to sign the papers for the sale of the factory and tomorrow I have meetings in the morning with my lawyer and accountant. Wednesday I start training my replacement at the apartment complex."

Katherine was startled by that news. "You do? I didn't know they had hired someone already."

"Oh, I'm sorry I didn't mention it before. It's somebody I've known for a couple of years and he's a hard worker, although he's really young. In fact, he already has a wife and baby boy. It will be great for the folks living at the Smiling Seniors to have a little one to look after. The kid will get more attention than a prince. They plan to move in the first of June."

Katherine was not pleased with that news. "The first? That's less than two weeks

from now. How long have you known this?"

Neal paused and felt guilty that he hadn't told her. "I just found out last Thursday, honest. We've hardly talked to each other since then and besides, you knew I was leaving soon. The people in South Carolina have been real patient with the delays I've had in starting my new job. They were happy I moved up the date by three weeks."

"I guess I haven't kept up. Time has moved so fast the last couple of months and I'm really happy things are working out for you. I'm sorry I sounded brusque."

Neal smiled. "You, brusque? Katherine, you are the most unbrusque person I know. How about Thursday afternoon? Could I see you then? At the cabin?"

Katherine relaxed and smiled with him. "Yes, Neal. I look forward to it. Can we get a whole afternoon? With you leaving so soon, I want to absorb as much of you as I can. It's selfish I know, but indulge me."

"Consider yourself indulged. I'll meet you at 1:30. And Katherine, don't worry so much about my leaving. I understand the phones work pretty well between here and South Carolina and sometimes I even fly in airplanes."

Katherine laughed. "O.K. I'll stop pouting and look forward to Thursday. Bring food, O.K.? I'll bring some wine."

"Got it. See you then."

Tuesday afternoon, Katherine got a call from Sheila. "Hello, Mrs. Mitchell? This is Sheila from the Black Forest. Helen was in earlier and tried to call you, but there was no answer at your house. She could have left a message, but she doesn't have a phone, you know."

"Is there something wrong? Do I need to go over there?"

Sheila took a deep breath before continuing. "No, Ma'am. I don't think so, anyway. Helen just wanted me to ask you to come over to her place on Wednesday

afternoon, about 1:00 if you could. Can you?"

"Yes, I can. Please let her know that I look forward to visiting her again. Do I need to bring anything? Did she say what this is about?"

Sheila shook her head when she answered. "No. She didn't say nothin' like that. She just told me to invite you over."

"Thanks, Sheila. I'll be there."

"Thank you, Mrs. Mitchell. I'll tell her in the morning."

Helen's apartment door was ajar when Katherine arrived Wednesday morning. Katherine gently pushed it open and called to Helen. "Hello? Is anyone here? Helen?"

Helen was standing in the living room with her back to Katherine. She seemed to be watching something outside that she didn't want to turn away from. She told Katherine to make herself comfortable and she would be with her in a minute. Katherine complied and waited patiently for Helen to complete her observation.

Outside, Neal started the old Ford and let it idle a few minutes. He knew Helen was watching, so he was in no hurry to leave. Finally he backed slowly from the parking stall and made a wide swing into the circle drive. He paused and waved in front of Helen's window and then drove out of the parking lot and onto the street. He checked the rear mirror one last time to see if she would try to stop him, but the only person he saw outside was Betsy Fuller, carrying a small bag of groceries. He accelerated as he headed for the interstate.

Helen sighed gently and stood quietly for a few moments before turning to join Katherine. She walked slowly to the desk chair to sit down and rested her cane against the side of her lap. Katherine had never seen her look so sad. Even when she was taken off to the hospital, Helen had looked defiant, angry and confused, but not sad. Katherine wondered what had happened to cause this change.

"Is something wrong, Helen? You look upset."

Helen shook her head and glanced over her shoulder out the window. "Oh, it's nothing important, Katherine. Some days are like that. I'll be fine shortly. Besides, I had some things I needed to discuss with you this morning."

Katherine was sure there was more to it, but she didn't push Helen any more. "I can stay as long as you like, Helen. Can I get us some tea?"

Helen brightened at the suggestion. "Oh, I would like that very much. Can you find everything you need in the kitchen or do you want me to come, too?"

Katherine was already up and about to explore the small kitchen. "No. You stay right where you are. This is such a small place that I can talk to you from here and I'll just open cabinets until I find what I need. I know from the stories I hear that I won't find much in your kitchen to get in my way."

That comment made Helen laugh and the two women exchanged light conversation while Katherine prepared the silver tray. She then carried the tea service into the living room and placed it on the desk. Katherine formally served tea to Helen and then poured some for herself. She again admired the lovely porcelain cups and saucers. They were a nearly translucent white with a painted blue rim, edged in gold. Katherine was amazed at their nearly weightless elegance and utility.

As the women shared the slow tea ritual, Katherine thought about Helen's long busy life and how independent she had always been. She wondered what such autonomy felt like. "Helen, you know you make me think about my life in some new and uncomfortable ways."

"Really? You seem extremely comfortable to me."

"I know. Sometimes lately I wonder if that's been good for me. I mean, when you told me about how your father took you to the golf course and told you to make a decision about your future, I tried to remember if anything close to that had happened to me. It hasn't. I realized that I've just sort of fallen into things as they came along. I

never took a minute to step back and question any of it. It was as though the path was cleared before me and I just wandered down it. The problem was, that path was created by other people and there was never even one intersection where I decided where I wanted to go."

"Aren't you exaggerating just a bit? I mean, you seem pretty free to come and go as you please. You aren't tied to your house after all."

"Oh, that's not what I mean. I make lots of little decisions all the time, but the big ones seem to be in other people's hands. Even now, Stephen assumes I'll live wherever he chooses and spend my time doing projects he approves. I grew up being told I would become an excellent wife and mother and I did. I went to college and joined a sorority and got married to my long-time boyfriend because everybody kept telling me it was the right thing to do. Your story about making that life decision really got me thinking. And now it amazes me that people want to begin telling you how to live when you're 93. Isn't that strange to you?"

"Oh, a little I guess. But I've been considered a little strange and uncooperative most of my life. It must be quite pleasing to be as accepted in the world as you are."

"I know. It is very pleasing most of the time, but there are moments when I feel like I've lost track of myself somewhere. I'll get over it, I'm sure, but lately I've been a little restless. What if, just once, I made a big life decision all on my own and lived with it? Who would I be then and what would happen to me? I guess I'll never know."

"Don't be so sure about that. You are still a young woman after all."

Katherine laughed. "Only when I talk to you do I feel young. My children are all adults, you know. I've passed the age of making such grand choices. I need to be happy with the life I've built."

"My, my. You suddenly sound just like a Victorian tapestry. How quaint and old-fashioned of you. The problem is, I don't believe it a bit. How is Neal doing, by the way?"

Katherine shook her head and laughed at Helen's insight. Their conversation drifted into more impersonal matters as the two women finished the pot of tea. Then Helen rose from her chair and asked Katherine to bring the tea service to the kitchen for her. Katherine complied and Helen began running hot water into the sink. Katherine put the tray on the counter and reached over to put her hand on Helen's wrist. "Oh please, Helen, let me wash those. It will only take me a minute. You go back and have a seat and I'll keep talking to you from here."

Helen placed her wet hand on Katherine's and looked up at her with a half-smile. "I understand that you could help me with this, and I do appreciate your offer. But I need for you to sit down this time. I must run my fingers over the surface of these old friends myself this morning. Beatrice usually insisted I clean up when we finished our afternoon tea in Boston. She said she would always keep house for us, but I needed to feel connected to things sometimes. So, I ran sinks of hot water every day for more than thirty years."

Katherine did as she was told and sat in the wicker chair. She didn't continue the conversation, but waited patiently as Helen squeaked her wet fingers across the slippery porcelain cups. Helen then dried the delicate objects with an old linen towel she had pulled from the drawer. Instead of placing the tea set back in the cabinet, Helen left it on the end of the counter and asked Katherine to join her in the kitchen.

Helen spoke so quietly, that Katherine had to lean into her to hear all the words. "My court date is next Wednesday, you know. A week from today."

"Yes. Have you changed your mind about a lawyer? Is that why you invited me here this morning?"

Helen smiled, broadly this time, and shook her head adamantly. "No, no, no. That is not it at all. It's quite a different matter. Can you open that little closet for me?"

Katherine complied and noticed that the entry closet had only one coat, a broom and a pair of rubber boots. On the shelf above were several small items that Katherine

couldn't make out until she turned on the light. Then she saw that the phone book and clothes brush were there. "Is there something you want me to get for you? Do you want me to sweep the floor?"

"No, my dear. I want you to reach up and take out the book and the brush and set them on the counter beside the tea service."

Katherine did this and closed the closet door. She watched as Helen slowly stroked the thick yellowed phone directory and glided her fingers across the harsh bristles of the fine old brush. Then Helen looked up at Katherine and spoke very clearly. "I want you to take these things with you today. I want you to have them."

Katherine had not expected this. "But Helen, why? They are yours and you care so much about them. They are your treasures. Why are you giving them away?"

"Because they are my treasures. Do you understand what it means to be appointed a guardian? If the court decides in Ann's favor, I shall have no say in any of the decisions in my own life. Ann will be able to dispose of my property as she sees fit. I know Ann. She would toss out the phone book and the brush. She would see them as the sentimental junk of a crazy old woman. The tea service is another matter. It's an antique, you know. (But then so is the brush, but Ann is too unobservant to know that.) Ann would either display the set on a lighted shelf in her house or sell it to a dealer."

"But why wouldn't she let you keep it for yourself?"

"I told you. I know her. She will be so happy to provide me with new clothes, a new place to live in another part of the state and brag to her friends about her generosity. She'll have horror stories about my lack of worldly possessions and how she had to save me from myself. I want to protect my valuables in case things go badly for me next week. I like making this decision now, while I still can."

"Of course I'll help you with this today, but if Judge Matthews decides in your favor, I'll return them that same afternoon."

"Thank you, Katherine. We'll see how it goes. One more thing, could you go to

my desk and get an envelope out of the middle drawer? It's addressed to Meredith and it's rather large. It's stuffed with legal papers and things. Could you go to the Post Office and send it registered mail for me? I would do it myself, but I don't want to raise questions with the local postmaster about why I'm mailing something like that to Meredith. People all over town like to call Ann about the strangest things."

Katherine was suddenly a little bewildered herself. "So what are you sending to her? Can I ask? Of course, if you don't want to tell me, you don't have to."

Helen laughed and shook her head. "O.K. Why don't we both sit back down for a little while so I can explain it to you. Did you say you had some time?"

"I have all the time you need."

Katherine went to the desk and took the large manila envelope out of the middle drawer. "It weighs a lot. I'm not sure you could have managed it and your cane, anyway."

Helen made her way back to the desk chair, pausing to look out the window at her empty parking stall before sitting down. "That's true. I'm glad you can help me with this."

"So, what is it I'm mailing to Meredith?"

"I guess you could say you're mailing her the Ford."

Katherine gasped. "Is this the title to your car?"

"Not exactly. I worried that Ann could go retrieve the car if she became my guardian. I needed to convert the Ford into something Ann couldn't touch. I hope this works."

Katherine smiled in spite of herself. "You cagey old woman. What did you do?"

Helen laughed and took a deep breath. "I sold it to Neal and had him consult an attorney for me. The attorney drew up those papers for Meredith's baby, Emily, and then he worked with a banker in Madison to set up a trust fund. When Emily graduates from high school, she can pick any college in the country. She should have plenty of money to

spare. Let's see Ann argue that Emily shouldn't have access to a bright future. That baby girl is family, you know. It won't be a pretty headline if Ann tries to break the trust."

"But the Ford, Helen. What if Ann doesn't become your guardian? You'll miss that car so much."

Helen shook her head. "You're forgetting that Neal was my connection to the Ford. He's leaving, so I would have to sell it anyway. I wouldn't trust it with other people, so I think this is best for everybody."

Katherine still looked concerned. "It's a lovely thing you're doing for Meredith and her baby, but wasn't the Ford going to pay for your funeral? You don't have a savings account or anything. Doesn't that bother you?"

Helen really laughed this time. "Oh, Katherine. How you worry over things. When I die, I'll be just as happy if they set me out on the curb in a large plastic bag. By then, it won't matter to me at all. Besides, do you really think Ann would let a Grant family member pass without a proper service, without baskets of rare flowers and a plot on the hill overlooking Winterborne? Ah, and think of the tombstone she'll supply. Don't worry about that, Katherine. I don't."

Katherine looked down at the envelope resting on her lap. The address was written in a fine curving script, acquired during a time of attention to penmanship. Katherine hoped that Meredith would place the envelope in safe keeping, as well as its contents. Emily would someday appreciate the personal connection to her benefactor. She looked up and Helen was smiling at her. They exchanged a long silent understanding of the thing that Helen had done.

Katherine rose and walked to the kitchen counter to survey the treasures she was to take with her. "I think I'll take the book, envelope and brush to the car first and come back for the tea set. It's so fragile. Is there a box in the apartment that I could use to carry it out to my car?"

Helen shook her head. "No. I don't keep things around. But Mary Yoder may

have something you could use, if she's home."

"I'll try that. Thank you for trusting me with these special things, Helen. I know how much they mean to you." Katherine couldn't resist hugging Helen briefly before she left, and then she darted out the door and down the hall. She felt overwhelmed by her visit and was suddenly strangely aware of her own mortality. She wondered if it showed in her demeanor as she imagined how it felt to become fully conscious of the end of your own life. She shivered and pushed the remote door opener for her Lexus.

Katherine cleared a shelf in the living room as soon as she arrived home. The morning sun held court on that shelf for at least two hours each day, even in the middle of Wisconsin winters. She knew the tea set would get its proper attention at that location. She gently arranged the tray, teapot, saucers and cups until she was perfectly happy with their placement. Katherine then stepped back a few feet and took several photographs of the grouping to give to Helen.

Just as she finished, the phone rang. "Hello. This is Katherine Mitchell." "Hi, Katherine. I'm glad I caught you at home. Did you hear anything from Amy yet?"

"Oh, Hi Stephen. No, I haven't heard from her, but with Amy I think that means things are fine. She'll probably call this weekend some time, after she's settled in. How are your plans going? Are you still leaving Friday?"

Stephen paused before continuing. "Well, we still plan to leave Friday morning and Jane decided to join us. She said she would scout the island for you and send you pictures of some houses. I really think she's just bored and she thought a couple weeks in Puerto Rico would be fun."

"Did you say a couple of weeks? I thought you were staying a week at the most. Why did you decide to extend it?"

This time Stephen laughed. "Well actually it's because Jane decided to go along. She booked a fishing boat for us. You know, one of those four-day excursions to get tan and catch the big one. Paul and I decided to give it a try, to see if we really liked it. We've talked about buying a boat, you know."

Katherine sighed and responded, "Are you sure you want to keep this house in Winterborne? You sound enraptured by the whole idea of Puerto Rico."

Stephen laughed. "I guess I am a little 'enraptured'. I sure wish I could get you excited about it. Maybe once you finish in court, you can fly down and join us. I know Jane would love it. She doesn't mind hanging out with Paul and me, but I can tell she misses the company of a woman."

"How astute of you, Stephen. I don't know. Maybe I'll look into coming down, but I can't promise anything. I'll let you know if I hear from Amy."

Stephen chuckled again. "Gee, Katherine, first I'm enraptured and now I'm astute. Have you been spending your free time reading dictionaries?"

Katherine smiled and shook her head. "No, Stephen. I've had plenty to do in my free time. The people at the Smiling Seniors have kept me very occupied. Let me know when you get to Puerto Rico and say 'Hi' to Jane for me. With any luck, she'll catch a bigger fish than either of you."

"You're probably right. She seems to be good at everything she does. I'll talk to you before Wednesday, but I wanted to tell you that I hope things go well for you in court. I know how hard you've worked the last couple months and I'm sure you must be getting nervous."

Katherine was surprised at Stephen's comment. "Thank you. Sometimes I've felt like you haven't noticed or cared much about it. That was nice of you."

"Sometimes I'll surprise you Katherine, so you need to stay on your toes. Talk to you soon. 'Bye.'"

"Good-bye."

Katherine was indeed beginning to get very nervous about the court hearing. She had never testified in a courtroom and she suddenly found herself wondering if she could do it right. She knew that worrying over it was irrational, but she also knew that those thoughts kept returning. She decided the antidote for this affliction was to stay very, very busy until Wednesday. She had Thursday at the cabin with Neal, but then there were days and days of empty time to fill. Katherine decided to find out if Molly was free this weekend.

Molly answered the phone on the third ring. Katherine explained her dilemma and Molly came to the rescue. She offered to treat Katherine to eighteen holes of golf on both Saturday and Sunday. She made reservations for them to go to the Sunday Brunch at the Club and offered to drive to the mall in Madison on Monday. Katherine was relieved by Molly's willingness to support her this way. She didn't need to think about anything with Molly in charge of the schedule. She also didn't need to talk about Helen, since Molly found such talk depressing. She could take her own mental vacation before the stress of the court hearing.

Thursday morning, Katherine felt excited in anticipation of seeing Neal that day. This new giddiness at the thought of touching him surprised her. She hoped it wasn't a dangerous way to feel. Then she decided she was just horny after all, what with Stephen gone and Neal such a good lover. Why shouldn't she feel excited at the prospect of being with him again?

When she arrived at the fishing cabin at 1:30, she was startled by the sight of the old Ford. She knew Neal had bought it, but she hadn't expected to see it there. It did look beautiful though, as if it had been parked there every day for years. The lush green

grass and trees made an excellent backdrop for it, with the reflecting sun on the lake adding sparkle to the picture. Neal walked out as Katherine parked the Lexus nose to nose with the Ford.

He came around to open the car door for her and took her hand as she lifted herself up from the seat. "I guess Queen E. told you about the car, huh?"

Katherine squeezed his hand as they walked toward the Ford. "Yes. I mailed the legal papers to Meredith yesterday morning. Why didn't you tell me what Helen was planning? It sounds pretty complicated. I may have been able to help you with some of the details."

Neal smiled and shook his head. "No. Helen and I talked it over and decided you needed to stay as impartial as possible while we put the plan together. Otherwise, the judge may say you participated too much and observed too little. He may accuse you of that even now, but we felt we did the right thing by trying to protect you."

"Protect me from what? I'm not the one they're holding the hearing for."

"Ooh, slow down, please. We weren't sure why, but we both felt a need to do this part ourselves and tell you about it later. Sometimes you need to remember that Helen has lived a lot of years and has developed some pretty good understandings of the world and how it works. I trusted her judgment on this, so I think you should too. Besides, you know all about it now, so what difference does it make?"

Katherine gave him a tiny smile. "None, I guess I was just pouting because you didn't ask me to join the little game you were playing. So, what are you going to do with the car?"

"Funny you should ask. I plan to leave tonight and drive straight through to South Carolina. I thought that getting the car out of the state was the best choice. I'll stay and unpack some things at my new house and then get the title and license switched over on Monday morning. I'll fly back Monday afternoon to be here in time for court on Wednesday. But Katherine, you know I leave for good next Friday. My job starts a

week from Monday and the new guy at the Smiling Seniors wants to move in next weekend. That means this is our last day here together."

Katherine hugged him and tried to give him a light response. "Of course I know it. That's why I brought such a good bottle of wine. I hope your food measures up."

"Oh, I think it will. I brought tenderloins and I'm ready to toss the best Caesar salad you've ever eaten. But the best part is dessert. Sheila baked me a Black Forest cake from the Black Forest Cafe and she put an extra layer of frosting on top. I thought you and I could play in it. What do you think? Have you ever smeared and licked frosting from various body parts?"

Katherine laughed and followed him down the narrow sidewalk leading into the cabin. "No Neal, as a matter of fact I haven't. But if I'm going to try such a thing, I can't think of a better body to experiment with."

The ceiling was high and long windows lined the right wall. Polished wooden benches provided seating for spectators and potential witnesses. While such a setting could have felt church-like and spiritual, that was not the sense Katherine felt. She was instead overwhelmed by its power. She studied the judge's bench and noticed that it was not only large and intimidating, but that it was built on a platform above the level of the rest of the floor. This need to look up to the judge became visually symbolic of the attitude of the court itself.

Many people Katherine recognized had already been seated. Ann's attorney sat between Helen and Ann at one of the two wide tables facing the judge. Mary Yedor, her sister Betty and Liz Harley were sitting in the back row. In front of them were Agnes Snyder, Clara Simmons, Sue Wagner and Alice Hazz. Katherine wondered how many of these tenants were called to testify and how many were there to watch the proceedings. On the other side of the aisle sat Leslie Logan and Chris Mellon. They both carried fat folders which probably contained written documents to support their testimony. Sheila Baker was sitting alone two rows behind Leslie and Chris, so Katherine decided to join her. Neal had apparently not yet arrived. Katherine wondered how his drive to South

Carolina had been. She tried not to think about his being gone for good in just two short days.

Helen looked over her shoulder and caught Katherine's eye. They waved to one another. Ann saw Helen wave and followed its direction to see Katherine, who nodded and smiled at Ann, who half-smiled in return and looked away.

Sheila and Katherine CHAPTER FIFTEEN the glories of the architecture of the old courthouse while waiting for Judge Matthews to arrive. At 9:05 he entered and everyone stood up. They were seated again only when the clerk gave them permission to

do so. Katherine arrived at the courthouse at 8:45 a.m. on Wednesday. The hearing was set for 9:00 and she didn't want to spend much time waiting in the hall to go in. The courtroom door had been opened by the time she got there, so she walked inside. The room was large and paneled in dark, rich wood. The ceiling was high and long windows lined the right wall. Polished wooden benches provided seating for spectators and potential witnesses. While such a setting could have felt church-like and spiritual, that was not the sense Katherine felt. She was instead overwhelmed by its power. She studied the judge's bench and noticed that it was not only large and intimidating, but that it was built on a platform above the level of the rest of the floor. This need to look up to the judge became visually symbolic of the attitude of the court itself.

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Sheila and Katherine chatted and commented on the glories of the architecture of the old courthouse while waiting for Judge Matthews to arrive. At 9:05 he entered and everyone stood up. They were seated again only when the clerk gave them permission to do so. This ritual reinstated who was in power for the duration of the proceedings. The clerk read aloud the number and subject identification of the hearing to follow. Just before the guard officially closed the door to all comers, Neal slipped in and sat in the back row. He winked at Katherine, who had been waiting for him to arrive. She actually blushed when he winked. Mary Yoder was the only person in the room who noticed and she simply looked away to give them their privacy.

The clerk called the first witness on the list, Ann Carter. She took the traditional oath to tell the truth and the hearing began. Her attorney, Jack Wilson, approached the witness box and paused a moment before beginning. Ann took a deep breath to collect her thoughts.

Then, Wilson began. "Ann, could please identify your relationship to Helen Grant?"

Ann looked at Helen when she answered. "Helen is my aunt. My father, Randolph Grant, was her baby brother. I am her only living relative in Winterborne."

"Thank you. Can you tell me why we are here today? I mean, can you explain to all of us why you want to take the responsibility of guardianship for your aunt?"

Ann cleared her throat before she continued. "Aunt Helen lived in Boston most of her life and we didn't see much of her, but we all loved her and enjoyed her letters when we received them. She was a school teacher in a private girl's school and we were all so

proud of her. Our only sadness was that she never married; never was able to continue the family heritage. But grandfather was always fond of her, so she lived her own life as she saw fit. Then she retired and Alpha got sick and Helen came back here to live in Winterborne."

Wilson interrupted. "So how does this have a bearing on your wanting the guardianship?"

Ann wiggled just a little in her chair. "Well I just wanted to explain that none of us knew Helen very well, but we all always loved her. Some of her ways were peculiar and we couldn't have known that, since she lived so far away."

"What do you mean, 'peculiar'?"

"Well, she didn't want to come to any family gatherings when she came back to town. She said she had lived for years without them and she wasn't going to start now, just because she had moved back. We offered her a discount membership at the Club and everything and she just always kept to herself over there, baby-sitting Alpha, even though we offered to get her out into the community. It just didn't seem natural to us, her being a Grant and all. People like to mix with us, if you know what I mean, and she made it seem like she was just too good for the locals. Even Alpha tried to get her out, but it didn't work. And then Alpha died and Helen needed a place to live."

"Did you offer her such a place?"

"Of course I did. She's family and I owed her that. Helen just laughed and said she would rather live anywhere but in my house. She said there were too many rules and expectations for her there. She said she wanted her 'freedom', like I would try to restrict her. Helen could have come and gone as she pleased, but she decided to move to that public housing place instead. Imagine being offered her own wing of my house and she chooses to live in a government-subsidized apartment. A Grant woman. It was quite humiliating at the time. A lot of people thought she was crazy then."

"But she managed all right in her apartment, didn't she?"

became furious with me for suggesting such a thing. She accused me of being a manipulative busybody. I was very hurt by it. She didn't seem to understand how much time I had put into finding this place and how perfect it would be for her. She insisted I bring her home early from the family Christmas dinner and she hasn't been civil to me since. That's why I went to the judge. I know she needs someone to help her."

Jack Wilson spoke over his shoulder to Ann as he looked down at Helen, who was sitting silently at the counsel table. "Can you tell me any other reasons you think Helen may not be taking proper care of herself - besides the ones you've mentioned?"

"Well I guess one of the most important ones is her mishandling money. She doesn't have a cent in savings and she's been sending large amounts of cash to her young grandniece in South Dakota. Her name is Meredith Franklin and I believe she's taking advantage of Helen. Meredith's father went to prison for stealing money and I think his daughter is showing a similar family trait. Someone must stop her before she takes everything from Helen."

"Thank you, Ann. I think that's all I need from you right now. Did you have any questions, Judge Matthews?" Wilson gave a brief bow of his head as he asked the judge this question.

"Yes, Mr. Wilson. I do have just one question for Mrs. Carter." He then turned and looked down at Ann, who was sitting to his right in the massive wooden witness chair.

"I understand that you have studied this group home very thoroughly, Ann. Do you know if they have a vacancy now? You mentioned having approached them last winter."

Ann looked very pleased with herself. "Yes, Judge Matthews. My husband Randolph and I took the liberty of paying for a place for her since last December, hoping she would agree to accept it. I bought bed linens and nightgowns and several simple day dresses for her. All Helen needs to do is go over there. They've been waiting for her."

The judge looked pleased with her forethought in this matter. "Thank you, Mrs. Carter. You may step down now, but I may call you back later."

Ann breathed a sigh of relief and returned to her seat, smiling smugly at Helen, who remained passive and silent.

The next witness called was Leslie Logan, who toted her large file with pride to the witness stand. Ann's attorney asked her about her educational background and work history, which qualified her as an experienced observer of old people living in closed communities. With her professional credentials established, Leslie classified Helen as "odd" and "unlike most people her age". She described how Helen never attended social gatherings, had no family visitors and did not eat in the community dining room for lunch. Instead, Helen had her meals delivered and did not talk much with the delivery person. Leslie went on to describe how Helen left the building every day at regular times and paid her rent promptly each month.

This last statement caught the attention of Judge Matthews. He interrupted Wilson and asked Leslie, "You mean you have never had to remind Helen that the rent was due? That seems like a sign that she could manage her affairs, don't you think?"

Leslie was a bit intimidated by this challenge, but she had prepared an adequate response. "Helen knew it was time to pay the rent when she got her statement from the bank. That was usually the same day that Sheila came by to have her restaurant bill paid. I always assumed that Sheila told Helen to go pay her rent so she wouldn't get in trouble. I thought it was more Sheila than Helen knowing the day of the month. That's just what I observed sir, but it happened that way every month, so it made sense to me."

Judge Matthews was aware of his ability to intimidate, so tried to calm Leslie. "Oh, that does make a lot of sense. Thank you for your clarification. Please continue, Mr. Wilson."

He had no more questions for Leslie, so she was dismissed and allowed to return to her seat. Leslie felt relieved to be finished and smiled at Chris Mellon as she crossed

the open space to the general seating area.

Chris Mellon was the next witness called and her credentials were even more impressive than Leslie's. She proudly stated that she had received an MSW from Madison two years before and had worked for the state of Wisconsin for eight years. She had experience in many areas of social work, including a graduate paper on the dynamics of working with the elderly in rural communities.

Jack Wilson walked up to Chris and looked directly at her when he asked his questions. He considered her a professional in her field, who was accustomed to testifying in courtroom situations. "Ms. Mellon, do you have any special insights into Helen's apparently odd behaviors?"

Chris was pleased to have someone publicly acknowledge the depth of her professional expertise. "As a matter of fact, I do. Most people in Helen's situation look forward to community affiliations, in lieu of biological family ties. Substitutes for familial bonds become imperative in maintaining emotional connectiveness into advanced years. Dr. Rotowski has proven this in many field studies. Public and private housing opportunities often form outlets for the human need for bonding and companionship. Public access areas, such as lobbies, dining rooms and game rooms serve this function very well."

"Thank you for your overview, Ms. Mellon. How does Helen's case fit this scenario?"

"Oh, she's very dysfunctional in that regard. The community has given her various opportunities for expression and she has denied them all. In fact, she has undermined these efforts with an obvious hostile reaction to their overtures toward her. Helen has many well-defined clinical problems that should be addressed in a controlled environment, for her own good."

"Do you have any specific examples that would be helpful to the court in its decision?"

"No. Chris rifled through the file on her lap. "Let me use just two. On January 13 of this year, she assaulted a restaurant patron in downtown Winterborne. After a lengthy discussion with Helen over the incident, I determined that she showed no remorse and had no intention of apologizing to the victim of her attack. In fact, she laughed when I brought up the whole incident. It showed a psychological disregard for the well-being of others. I think she verges on being a sociopath. I saw no evidence of conscience in the matter."

The judge interceded at this point. "Sociopath? Really? I've had some of those in my court and they were quite distinct. I would lock away most of them for life."

Chris Mellon mellowed a bit. "Well, maybe sociopath is too harsh a term, but Helen certainly showed no remorse for what she did. She hit a man on the head with her cane and then laughed about it. I fail to see the humor in such an act."

Judge Matthews agreed that bopping someone on the head was uncivilized at best and asked for the next example.

Chris leafed through the file and found her next report for the court. "Well, on February 4, a group of women at the apartment complex were generous enough to buy Helen several bags of food to keep in her kitchen. It is commonly known that Helen doesn't provide for herself in this way. Well, Helen not only refused this generosity on the part of her neighbors, but she proceeded to give away the food to various people in the building. She even threw some of it into the dumpster. This indicates a total disregard for the reality of her existence. We all need food to survive and her community was trying to help her meet that need. Helen therefore is out of touch with her own real world. I can think of no more primary definition of "at risk" than a lack of food in one's environment."

Wilson smiled at this last official comment by an authority. "Thank you, Ms. Mellon. Do you have any questions, Judge Matthews?"

The judge smiled and shook his head as he looked over the notes he was making.

"No. I think you have been most thorough, Ms. Mellon. Thank you for your testimony. You may return to your seat."

The next witness on Jack Wilson's list was Sheila and Katherine hoped for a break in Helen's favor, finally. Sheila looked very nervous as she took her official oath to tell the truth in the sight of God and everybody. Katherine couldn't imagine Sheila doing otherwise.

Wilson asked Sheila about Helen's daily visits to the Black Forest Cafe. Sheila explained that Helen sat in the same place by the window every day and described her usual choice of food. He then asked if the bad Wisconsin winter weather ever kept Helen from coming in.

Sheila smiled at Helen as she answered. "Oh, only a couple of times. Helen's a real trouper. She mutters about the cold or rain on some days, but she says she likes to experience the bad weather so she can fully appreciate the good. I never heard that before I met her and I've always liked to look at weather that way since then."

"Yes. It sounds very philosophical of her. Can you tell us about your arrangements for billing her every month? That bill includes payment for some housekeeping also, does it not?"

Sheila took a deep nervous breath before she answered. "Well, I keep track of all her meals at the restaurant by writing her tickets for the food she gets and then putting the tickets in a box in the back room. The first day of every month, I staple all the tickets together and run a tape on the adding machine. Then I figure how many hours I worked cleaning that month and add it to the food bill. When I go to her apartment, she hands me a check she signed and I fill in the amount."

Wilson interrupted. "Do you know if she has kept those receipts over the years?"

"Oh, I don't know for sure. I never ran into them when I cleaned."

"Thank you. Were you in the restaurant on the day she assaulted the ice fisherman?"

Sheila swallowed hard and looked over at Helen, who waved at her. Sheila went on to explain the event as she saw it and she tried to emphasize that the man wasn't hurt. She told the judge that the fisherman wore two stocking caps and a hooded coat, so it would take a severe blow to make him notice much. The judge had no more questions for her when she finished, but explained to her that she could be called back if he had more questions.

Katherine hoped the judge noticed that Helen was eating two meals every day at the Black Forest, so she wasn't exactly starving to death because of a lack of groceries in her kitchen. She wished Helen had accepted her offer to find an attorney. Katherine believed a lawyer would have made the point to Judge Matthews about Helen's eating habits. She now hoped she could find a spot in her own testimony to emphasize that point.

Katherine was lost in thought for a few minutes, wondering if her report covered enough to clarify Helen's situation for Judge Matthews. Then she realized that various tenants were being called to testify. She was aware of only segments of their statements.

... "She always scares me when I meet her alone in the hall. I know she's hit people before and I try to walk the other way. She's yelled at me before and I don't want to be hit."

... "She never eats with us. It's like our food isn't good enough or something. And the language she uses. Ladies shouldn't even know those words."

... "She wears the same suit day after day. I can't imagine how dirty it must be. I don't know if she ever takes a bath. I don't even think she brushes her hair. Just look at how wild it looks today. Heaven knows when she ever had a real hair cut."

... "She scares my grandson half to death. Any more, he always asks if that scary old lady with the cane is home. If she is, he doesn't want to come visit me because he's afraid she'll yell at him. She did that once, you know. Kids remember things like that."

Jack Wilson stated that he had called all the witnesses on his list and he was ready to follow... "She's always mumbling under her breath, like she's talking to someone or something. I think she sees things and hears voices, if you ask me."

... "If I ever get that bad, I hope somebody steps in to take care of me. She seems so alone, you know what I mean? My heart just goes out to her. It's like she didn't have family or anything."

Katherine focused her full attention on the witness stand as she heard them call Neal's name. She felt relieved to think that finally Helen would have an advocate to talk to the judge about her strengths. She smiled as she watched Neal take his oath. He looked handsome in his navy suit and Katherine was amused by the serious expression on his face. To her, he suddenly presented the image of a Good Scout.

Jack Wilson got right to the point with his one question. "Mr. Parker, I know you are one of Helen's friends in Winterborne. You maintain her beautiful antique car and you run miscellaneous errands for her. Are you ever concerned for her safety when she walks to town every day?"

Neal squirmed and looked frustrated by the question. He paused for a considerable length of time before answering. "Yes sir, I am often concerned for her safety. But that doesn't mean..."

Wilson would not allow him to continue. "Thank you very much for confirming what the community believes about Helen's ability to make rational choices. You have been a supportive friend to her today. You may return to your seat."

Neal was obviously furious. Katherine could see a tightness develop along his jaw line as he clenched his teeth together. His testimony had done Helen more harm than good and Katherine kicked herself again for not getting a lawyer to represent Helen.

Jack Wilson stated that he had called all the witnesses on his list and he was ready to follow the instructions of the court on how to proceed from here. Judge Matthews thanked him for his presentation and said that he would like to call two more people to testify. First he wanted to hear the report of the court-appointed advocate, Katherine Mitchell.

Katherine walked slowly to the witness stand and felt extremely nervous as she took the oath. When she sat down, she turned to look at Judge Matthews and answer any questions he had for her. Although she had known him casually for several years, he suddenly seemed like a complete stranger. She felt like she had the lead in the school play and had forgotten all her lines.

Judge Matthews seemed to understand Katherine's state of mind. He smiled at her and leaned across the side of his chair as he spoke in a clear, calm voice. "Good morning, Katherine. First I want to thank you for your hard work and diligence in preparing your report. I enjoyed reading it and some of your conclusions are remarkably insightful. I think you took your assignment very seriously. I would like to make some of your comments part of the court record, if you don't mind."

"Of course, Judge Matthews, that's why I'm here today."

"Thank you. Could you tell us first, what conclusion you reached about the issue of guardianship for Helen?"

Katherine breathed deeply once and began. "I honestly think that making Ann guardian for Helen would be a mistake. I understand Ann's reasons for believing it's necessary, but I think it's a severe solution for some minor difficulties in Helen's life. Helen isn't perfect, but she's far from helpless or dysfunctional. In my opinion, given her available resources, she functions just fine."

Judge Matthews looked over at the table where Ann and Helen sat. Helen was watching Katherine with approval and Ann was glaring. He encouraged Katherine to continue with her report by asking, "How much time did you spend studying Helen's life?"

Katherine paused to think for a moment. "Oh, I never really calculated that. I guess it averaged about ten hours a week for about three months. Some weeks were more. Some were less."

"Did your opinions change, once you got to know her?"

Katherine liked the question and could feel herself relaxing. "Oh, yes. At first she seemed very odd and prone to recklessness. In fact, her stubbornness was very annoying to me. She was sick in April and wouldn't let me call my doctor for her. But as time passed I found myself accepting her oddness as natural to her and her recklessness as part of her adaptation to Winterborne and its restrictions."

"Restrictions? What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, compared to living in Boston or New York, Winterborne does have certain limitations. Helen had never needed to keep house or cook or socialize with people she didn't go out and choose. Suddenly she was expected to behave like a 'real' woman and she had no idea what that meant. She had always been a woman, and considered herself 'real'. That attitude created most of her current problems. She is rather set in her ways, but then aren't we all?"

The judge had to agree that familiar surroundings and habits create comfort as well as parochialism. He then asked her his next question. "Katherine, how do you feel about the money she sends to Meredith every month? Do you think that the young woman is taking advantage of the situation?"

Katherine looked directly at the judge when she answered. "No, Judge Matthews, I think that Helen initiated the gifts and Meredith accepts them with a clear conscience in the matter. Helen was very close to Meredith's grandmother and I think it's Helen's way

of substituting for the children she never had."

"But isn't it a little short-sighted at her age for Helen to not set aside burial funds, in order not to burden her family?"

Katherine couldn't help but smile, remembering Helen's reference to being placed in a garbage bag upon her death. She told the judge, "I think you should ask Helen how she feels about such preparation. She has her own political views on the matter."

Judge Matthews turned in his chair and faced Helen, who had smiled at Katherine's comment. "Thank you, Mrs. Mitchell. Your entire report will be entered in the record, but you have clarified very well what your attitudes are regarding my decision. You may step down and I reserve the right to recall you if I find it necessary."

Katherine felt like she should have said more, but she was relieved to know that her detailed report on the past three months would be part of the judge's final decision. She returned to her seat feeling relatively confident that no one had proved Helen incompetent.

The last witness called for the day was Helen Grant.

Katherine watched Helen slowly lift her cane from her lap to lean against it as she rose gracefully from her seat at the table. She wore a fresh white blouse and her usual lightweight wool summer blazer and plaid pleated skirt. Her beret sat comfortably on her combed smoothed hair and she wore new black leather oxford shoes. She was the most scrubbed and polished that Katherine had ever seen her. Ann had insisted on helping her dress before transporting her to court. It took several minutes for Helen to get to the witness stand and no one dared to offer help. She took her oath with dignity and then winked at Katherine before seating herself. Ann saw the wink and cast a dreadful eye in Katherine's direction. Katherine smiled back at Ann and shrugged.

Judge Matthews turned again in his chair and looked down to speak to Helen. "Hello, Helen. We met several months ago, when this case was first presented to the court. Do you remember our discussion then?"

Helen looked up at him and spoke clearly. "Yes Judge Matthews, I remember talking about Ann and her desire to become my guardian. I believed then, and I believe now, that she is over stepping her rights as my nearest living relative. I choose to live my life in my own way. It has worked for me for ninety-three years and I think it can work another ten or so."

Judge Matthews smiled at Helen. "But don't you think you should change some of your ways, like walking to town every day? Can you decide to walk only in good weather?"

Helen looked out into the courtroom and caught Sheila's eye. She looked at Sheila as she answered the judge. "Sheila spoke quite eloquently on that topic. I become unrealistic if I walk only in the sunshine. Life isn't like that, you know. Walking in storms keeps me tied to my existence in this unpredictable world. It invigorates me. It's as simple as that and as rational."

Judge Matthews sat back in his wide leather chair without speaking for nearly three minutes, which in a courtroom seems an eternity. When he spoke again, it was with sadness and resolve. "I think your point is well made, Helen, and it explains a lot. Unless you have more to tell us, you may return to your seat and thank you for your comments. They have been very useful in my decision."

Helen slowly returned to the table and placed her cane on her lap. The courtroom became silent as the participants waited for Judge Matthews to explain his decision. He didn't leave the room or think long about the testimony he had heard. He rapped his gavel on the surface of his large wooden desktop and cleared his throat.

He spoke with authority and conviction and everyone present knew he had given the issue a great deal of private thought over the previous few months. "The court's decision in the matter of Helen Grant is as follows: The evidence is quite clear that Helen indeed manages her daily affairs in an orderly, if unconventional, way. She is not malnourished or ill. Helen pays her bills on time and has a very small support network

she can rely on in case of emergencies."

Katherine was getting excited about what the judge was saying. It was obvious he had read her report and agreed with her that Helen was eccentric but functional.

Katherine turned in her seat to smile at Neal, who did not appear to share her optimism.

Judge Matthews continued in his even voice. "If Helen were sixty-four or seventy-four or even a feisty eighty-four, my decision would be easy. But Helen turns ninety-four this summer and at the end of that summer comes another Wisconsin winter. Helen has indicated that not only will she continue to venture out into snowstorms, but she is excited about the idea of doing so. As a judge, I cannot take the responsibility for sending her into one more winter. I must put a stop to this self-destructive behavior and the only good tool I have to accomplish that is to send her to the group home, where they are waiting for her. She will be cared for there and as a society, we have a responsibility to older people to keep them as safe and free from harm as possible. Therefore, guardianship is granted to Ann Carter, effective immediately. Jack, if you will counsel Ann as to the details of this arrangement, I would appreciate it. Thank you. Court adjourned."

And with that statement, Judge Matthews took away Helen's rights as a citizen and a full human being. Ann was so excited, she hugged Jack Wilson and Leslie Logan. Katherine was speechless and shocked. The end had happened so quickly that she had trouble fully comprehending what Judge Matthews had actually said. Neal approached her, looking crestfallen and lost. Sheila had tears in her eyes as she left the room and the tenants from Smiling Seniors were thrilled to go back and spread the good news. Helen just sat at the table, twirling her cane aimlessly on her lap and watching Ann celebrate.

Katherine stayed in the kitchen as she watched Neal leave. It was a beautiful spring day and she noticed how green the back yard had become. It was such a lovely color in

contrast. Neal drove Katherine home in her Lexus. He said he would call a friend to come pick him up and return him to his truck downtown later. Katherine said very little in the

car and invited Neal to come in for coffee. There was no light conversation about what the neighbors might say or what they might eat for lunch. After Neal called for his ride back, the two of them sat at the kitchen table and discussed what had happened in court.

Katherine was baffled. "Why would he do such a thing after saying he agreed she was living a functional life?"

Neal took Katherine's hand and squeezed it gently. "Helen put him in an awkward position, Katherine. If you were Judge Matthews, would you like to read the headline next January where Helen slips on the ice and gets run over by some mother in her minivan?"

"But that could happen anytime or not at all. Why not let her choose?"

"Because it's a small town and people vote and a judge must also work for the community he serves. Judge Matthews is still a good man, Katherine. I wouldn't want his job."

Katherine was on the verge of tears. "Well I don't think I'll ever understand and I know I'll have a hard time seeing him at the club again."

"I know. In some ways, I'm glad I'm leaving for South Carolina this afternoon. I plan to go by Helen's place and say good-bye before I go. I do hate leaving you like this, though. Do you want to come with me?"

Katherine smiled in spite of her weepy face. "Thanks for the offer, Neal. I can't go with you today, but you'll leave a number where I can reach you, won't you? I may take you up on your offer later."

Neal stood up and pulled Katherine to her feet to join him in a long embrace and some gentle lingering kisses good-bye. Neal's friend honked in the driveway and Katherine stayed in the kitchen as she watched Neal leave. It was a beautiful spring day and she noticed how green the back yard had become. It was such a cheery color in contrast to how she felt.

here the sheriff is already. That Ann sure knows how to get things done."

Katherine spent Thursday working in her house and yard. She tried to find heavy things to do, like planting flowers and washing the garage windows. She brought out summer colors for the master bedroom sheets and comforter to enhance all the sunshine now filtering into the room. She polished Helen's silver tray. Stephen called to tell her he had arranged a flight to Puerto Rico for her on Sunday morning and he would meet her at the airport with Jane and Paul. He told her to pack for at least a three-week stay. Stephen sounded very excited. Molly called to tell her she couldn't make it to the annual Women's Luncheon at the club Friday because Phil had invited her to join him for a long weekend in New Orleans. Molly was looking forward to staying up late and dancing. Katherine cleaned the oven late in the afternoon and went out to rent a movie. She still felt like a good cry, so she decided on *The English Patient*. Katherine fell asleep during the movie and slept soundly on the sofa until dawn.

Katherine planned to say good-bye to Helen on Friday morning, before going to the luncheon. She thought about what to say to her, but she couldn't imagine the right words. She rehearsed several options while driving across town, but none seemed adequate to her pain. When she arrived at the Smiling Seniors Apartments, she was surprised to see a sheriff's car parked at the entrance to the building. The new maintenance man was standing near the door, holding a lawn edger and looking at the front door of the complex. As Katherine walked into the entry area, she was surrounded by at least twenty tenants, all of them looking down the hall at something. Katherine heard whisperings and mutters, but couldn't quite grasp what they were saying.

Then she understood one of them. It was Liz Hurley. "They're here for her already. Ann tried to take her to that home yesterday and Helen put up a real fight. They said Ann stormed out and told Helen she would just call the police to come for her and

here the sheriff is already. That Ann sure knows how to get things done."

Clara Simmons agreed. "It took her awhile, but now things are really moving. Oh, here she comes!"

Katherine tried to crane her neck to see above the crowd of people. Then she saw them. Two sheriff's deputies were escorting Helen down the hall toward the front entrance. Helen was struggling frantically to free herself from their grasp. One deputy carried her cane. One carried her wool beret. Helen's grey hair stuck out defiantly in all directions. She insisted over and over that they turn around and take her home. She tried to plant her feet in the carpet so they couldn't move her. They lifted her slightly, so her feet were swinging back and forth wildly. Helen swore like an old sailor as her neighbors shook their heads at her crazy behavior.

Katherine was jammed in the middle of the crowd in the lobby as the deputies pushed open the heavy glass entry door. She caught Helen's eye as they lifted her sideways over the metal door frame. Still kicking and trying to free herself, Helen cried out. "Katherine! Tell them to take me home!"

Katherine stood frozen, watching as the deputies opened the squad car door to stuff Helen inside. As the door closed heavily, Helen could be seen trying to reach the other door to get out. The deputy gently pulled her arm back and signaled his partner to pull the car out of the parking lot. Katherine watched them leave as the crowd in the lobby began to dissipate.

Leslie Logan's office was locked. She had taken this Friday off. Unlike most of the women seated, she had not stopped in the powder room first. She made a practice of getting herself made-up and combed exactly as she wanted, before she left home. After that, she thought of other things. It worked. Her confidence covered any on route disarray.

As Katherine found her way to the window seat, Lisa Bryer was beginning one of her dog stories. " . . . so Frank and I went to the party, even though Gracie was in heat.

Frank even joked about it. He said, 'What if she takes in a neighborhood stray? We paid a hundred-dollar deposit for Chesterfield's services tomorrow.' I reminded Frank that she was safely locked in the garage. Who was she going to seduce from there?"

Several of the women at the table suggested who might be attracted to Gracie, and everyone laughed.

Well, when we got back from the party, I pushed the remote to open the garage door. The door opened and the

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

black mongrel. The window over the workbench was shattered and pieces of broken glass sparkled on the floor. The Black Romeo ran frantically into the darkness, while

Katherine smelled the changing air and listened to the distant rolling thunder as she walked toward the clubhouse. She realized she looked forward to the predictable rhythms of the club's Monthly Ladies' Luncheon. After what had happened with Helen this morning, she hoped to be soothed by the presence of old friends and acquaintances as she caught up on what she had missed the last few months. A blister rose on her outer left toe, where her new shoe claimed its own contour. She made a conscious effort to keep from favoring that foot.

As she crossed the foyer, her beige pumps made straight dents in the celery carpet. She stopped in the dining room entrance to survey the options. Good. One of the large reserved tables still had a vacant seat facing the southwest windows, where she could watch the grey storm approach over the rolling green golf course. She crossed the room, nodding and waving and smiling. She was one of the last to arrive, as usual. Unlike most of the women seated, she had not stopped in the powder room first. She made a practice of getting herself made-up and combed exactly as she wanted, before she left home. After that, she thought of other things. It worked. Her confidence covered any en route disarray.

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"Well, when we got back from the party, I pushed the remote to open the garage door. The door opened and the lights came on; there stood Gracie with a large, handsome black mongrel. The window over the workbench was shattered and pieces of broken glass sparkled on the floor. The Black Romeo ran frantically into the darkness, while Gracie stood there grinning ear to ear."

Lisa let that scene soak in while the laughing women caught their breath to hear more.

"Frank was furious. He kicked a trash can and muttered a chain of blue language. He said, 'So much for Chesterfield and a promising litter. No one's going to pay a dime for those bastards!' Frank was right. Gracie had ruined the return on our investment. We had searched and advertised to make just the right match. Chesterfield was ideal. They would have produced some fine, prize animals together."

Katherine recalled the other mongrel in Lisa's life. It was just three years ago that Monica, Lisa's oldest daughter, had become pregnant while a student at Ohio State. Ray was a student from Mexico. Frank didn't joke about that one, but he did insist that Monica have an abortion. Katherine imagined a beautiful, dark little boy who would never exist. He wore white cotton shorts with no shirt. His bare feet ran over familiar ground as he played on his father's ranch in Mexico. Bright yellow birds called to him from the deep branches of the ebony trees.

Katherine sighed and watched the approaching storm.

Lisa's story had reminded Carol Hillman of her recent week at the Kentucky Derby festivities. "Jed's cousin Stuart had a qualifier for the race this year. Those prize

animals at the Derby are truly amazing. I remember when Stuart bought the horse. The price seemed outrageous. But you know how it is, with stud fees and papers and training . . . Well, you know how expensive it is to produce the right horse."

Everyone nodded in agreement at the high cost of quality.

"Well you could tell, just looking at that horse, that he was a winner. The breeding didn't fail in that one. He shone and sauntered and tossed his head around, as if he deserved to be waited on hand and foot."

A waitress came with salads and interrupted the lively description. Another waitress followed, bearing a silver tray of crystal stemmed glasses filled with chilled Chablis.

Susan sipped her wine and continued. "I've been to several Derbies, but I never had a personal interest until this year. Stuart had invested more in that horse than he did in his house. It seemed like a big risk to me, but Jed reassured me that if the horse ran well at the Derby, then stud fees alone would pay back the investment with a profit. Well, Stuart's horse did a great job and is now a happy stud. The next generation of Derby winners could be descendants of that horse if they get the right match."

Katherine took a long drink of ice water. As she placed the glass back on the linen tablecloth, she caught the eye of one of the waitresses. It was Judy Frye and Katherine smiled at her. She had written a check to Judy last week. Katherine was treasurer of the Women's Benevolent Society of Winterborne, which awarded a vocational training scholarship each year to an underprivileged student. Judy Frye had been third in her high school class and would be attending the local technical college. Katherine had also written a personal check to the University of Wisconsin to cover Amy's next semester. Amy was not a particularly good student, so she was excited to finally be entering her senior and final year of school forever.

Lisa turned to Katherine, who by then was deep into her salad greens. "Say, Katie, Christine is getting married next year, isn't she? Are the plans going well? I heard

that her fiancée is working toward a partnership in a major law firm in Kansas City. With her job as a teacher, they should be able to live a good life and start having grandchildren for you. You must be looking forward to that. It's just too bad they're so far away. I mean, being a grandmother is such a joy after the children have left home."

Katherine let those words sink in as she stopped eating. Then, wiping her mouth with her napkin, she excused herself as she rose from her chair. "I don't mean to be rude, Lisa, but I must wash my hands. I'll tell you all about the wedding plans when I return."

Instead of turning left toward the upstairs ladies room, Katherine proceeded downstairs to the locker room. She walked to the wall of sinks and chose the one on the end, near the lockers. She stood in front of the mirror above the sink and studied her face. She saw a handsome face, well groomed and tastefully made-up. Her blonde hair was thick and shiny and just brushed the top of her shoulders when she moved her head. Her white teeth were even and her green eyes were round and wide-set. She was aging very well. She pictured Stephen in her mind and noted that he was aging well, also. A handsome couple. Handsome daughters. Like something from a magazine. The family album was full of amazingly handsome and successful people.

She reached up and removed her earrings. Pearls. A wedding gift from mother, all those years ago. Now she would give them to Sarah, her oldest daughter, and continue the tradition. Katherine touched her lapel and fingered the gold sorority pin. She always wore it on her lapel when she wore a suit. It was understated and well-designed. She took it off and placed it on the brim of the white enamel sink, beside the earrings. She felt the back of her neck and unclasped the gold chain which hung there. She coiled the chain into her cupped hand. Her grandmother had worn it when she was a young girl. The chain and tiny locket were a lasting memory of Grandmother Katherine. Her treasures of women now lay on the sink. She removed the last jewelry she wore - her wedding ring. Stephen had honored her request for a plain gold band. Although he offered her a variety of precious gems, she preferred the simplicity and continuity of the

band. She removed the ring and placed it beside the other shimmering symbolic objects. She paused and studied her ringless hand. The third finger was naked and rimmed in white where the band had been. She watched the hand move gently down to the rim of the sink. The hand pushed the jewelry into the wastebasket. The ring and pin and earrings and locket nested among the brown crumpled used paper towels.

Katherine walked quietly to the small dressing area and stood very still. She removed her beige linen jacket, folded it and placed it on a bench which was bolted to the floor between two rows of lockers. She took off her new leather pumps and rubbed her far-left toe, where the pain finally ended. She removed her skirt and her pantyhose. She gently unbuttoned her silk blouse, removed it, and pulled her slip over her head. She folded everything and placed each item in a pile on the bench. Thunder snapped outside as she heard heavy rain fall on the metal roof of the pool house. Katherine smiled and began to loosen the clasp of her lace bra. She removed the bra and while still holding it, she slid the matching panties down her legs. She stepped from the panties and put the underclothes under her clothes on the bench.

Katherine walked back to the mirror and saw herself. She studied the image and after a few minutes, she walked back to her locker to remove her golf rain slicker and her pool side thongs. She pushed her naked hands into the sleeves of the familiar jacket. She snapped the front of the slicker and felt its matte weight against her bare breasts. The coat seemed strangely heavier now than when she wore clothes under it.

She slid the big toe of her right foot around the post of the rubber sandal. She knelt down to massage the toes of her left foot before sliding them onto the bumpy surface of the sandal. Her outer toes were red and blistered, but they were no longer in pain. Katherine smelled the rubbery odor of her slicker and sandals. She wondered if the smell was really of rubber or were such formerly rubber items now plastic? Did plantation workers still labor in the rain forest, collecting sap to keep her pool-side feet protected?

Katherine pictured the rain forest as the storm outside heightened. She saw large straw hats protecting faces and shoulders from blistering sun or a sudden rain. She heard monkeys chatter in the trees and saw them swing among the dense green branches. She smelled the rich mud and felt soft cotton tunics, absorbing new rain.

Thunder rumbled through the locker room. Katherine walked out into the storm. Sam and Frances Brett had just made it back to the clubhouse from the eighth green. They were laughing and wet. Frances shouted to Katherine, who was at the edge of the patio. "Katherine, Sam can run back out there to get whatever you left behind, won't you Sam?" to which Sam readily agreed.

Katherine replied, "Thanks, but I'm already wet. You two go ahead and dry out." She turned and stepped into the rain as it got even heavier. Before Frances could reply, Katherine had disappeared.

Katherine walked to the bridge on Fairway Three. She stopped in the middle of the little plank structure and looked over the railing. She studied the swelling, rocky stream below. She raised one knee slightly and kicked one sandal into the water. It disappeared quickly under the bridge. She raised her other knee and repeated the gesture. She felt the rough wood planks under her feet and smiled.

She turned and walked across the closely cut green. Water oozed between her bare toes. The wet flag for Hole Three was flapping in the strong wind of the storm. Lightning sizzled to earth and within seconds, thunder echoed that vision with sound. Katherine continued to walk. The rain kept her from seeing where she was, but occasionally she came to a landmark she recognized. She stopped by a clump of trees and removed her rain slicker. She hung it on a low branch and continued her journey.

At first the rain felt cold, after the clammy warmth of the slicker. In a short time, she became the temperature of the water, and she was comfortable. She walked on the grass and enjoyed its texture. She walked in mud and wiggled her toes. She walked on stones and knew the relief of grass past the stones.

She was standing on the sixth green, just beyond the flowering lavender lilac bushes, when the sprinkler system came on. The system ran on a pre-set timer which didn't care if it rained. Katherine felt the water well up from under her. A soft stream eased its way up her legs, so she opened them to invite it in. The rain beat strongly from above. The sprinkler caressed her from below. She stood there, absorbing water, as monkeys chattered in the trees.

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